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White House Says It Will Kick Off Infrastructure Planning Thursday.

- Meeting of 15 agencies is initial step in developing proposals
- No decisions have been made on funding or financing options

President Donald Trump's administration will convene a meeting of at least 15 federal agencies Thursday as a first government-wide step toward crafting the president's \$1 trillion infrastructure initiative, a senior White House official said.

Gary Cohn, director of the National Economic Council, will lead the meeting, which will focus on identifying new projects that would boost the economy; finding existing projects, such as the Keystone XL pipeline, that could be expedited; targeting policies, outdated rules and laws that could delay projects; and developing funding and financing options, the official said.

The meeting follows Trump's speech to a joint session of Congress on Tuesday, when he said he wants to leverage public-private partnerships and public capital to upgrade crumbling roads, bridges, ports and other infrastructure. The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said that all funding options are currently on the table. Lawmakers and policy experts have floated ideas that include taxing corporate profits that are parked overseas and creating an infrastructure bank.

The official said that a proposal will be developed and presented to Trump, but the timing is uncertain.

Most U.S. infrastructure is owned and controlled by states and municipalities, so the federal government's role is more regulatory. Trump has already issued an executive order to expedite environmental reviews and permitting for high-priority projects.

'Percolate Up'

The National Governors Association provided to the White House a list of 428 priority projects from 49 states and territories on Feb. 8 that it had solicited from the states. How projects will be selected for funding has yet to be determined, the White House official said.

Governors from both political parties, interviewed at their annual winter meeting in Washington last weekend, said they expect to play a key role in those decisions.

"At the end of the day, I think it's going to percolate up from the governors," said Virginia Governor Terry McAuliffe, a Democrat and president of the National Governors Association. "They can't get this done in Congress without us."

Republican Governor Mary Fallin of Oklahoma, a former member of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, echoed McAuliffe's concern. "It's important to have that state input into what is a national priority," she said.

Trump, meanwhile, has been building his team to work on the plan. The White House announced on Tuesday that DJ Gribbin will serve as a special assistant to the president for infrastructure policy, under Cohn. Gribbin, a former chief counsel for the Federal Highway Administration and general counsel for the U.S. Department of Transportation, has worked on public-private partnership deals for Macquarie Capital USA Inc.

‘Every State’

During his speech to Congress, Trump called for “a new program of national rebuilding,” likening the initiative to President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s construction of the interstate highway system across the U.S.

Lawmakers are anxious for details. Representative Peter DeFazio of Oregon, the top Democrat on the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, said it’s “time to put some flesh” on Trump’s proposal. “What’s missing is a real plan and the money,” DeFazio said after Trump’s speech on Tuesday.

Representative Bill Shuster of Pennsylvania, the Republican chairman of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, said he’s met with Trump and his policy staff and told them there have to be projects in all states.

“We should look at every state and say what are the projects that are going to bring the states along,” Shuster said Wednesday at a meeting of the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials in Washington.

Democrats including DeFazio and even some Republicans have argued that trying to rely on the private sector alone won’t generate \$1 trillion of investment or allow projects in all parts of the U.S. Deals involving private investment require a revenue stream such as tolls, which aren’t popular or even practical in rural or thinly populated areas.

Spurring Investment

Democratic congressional leaders support more spending on infrastructure but say that the proposed mechanisms to spur private investment — such as a tax credit — would only benefit the wealthy. Republican congressional leaders have made it clear they won’t support a significant increase in spending that isn’t offset by cuts so that it doesn’t add to the debt or deficit.

The White House official said it’s premature to speculate what the mix of private and public funding and financing might be.

U.S. Transportation Secretary Elaine Chao said her office was exploring new ways to finance infrastructure, including through public-private partnerships, to attract private investment and remove barriers.

“Business as usual is just not an option anymore,” Chao said Wednesday at the transportation officials’ gathering in Washington. “Everyone can agree that our country can no longer take decades to build a new bridge or a new road, a new highway or airport.”

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