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State, Local Leaders Urge Congress to Act on Infrastructure Plan.

SPEED READ:

- **Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz and Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti testified on Capitol Hill Thursday, pleading with lawmakers in Congress to pass legislation that would provide new revenue for infrastructure improvements.**
- **Both the governor and the mayor have pushed for tax increases to fund transportation needs in their own jurisdictions — and have emerged unscathed.**

As the new Congress looks to reignite a national conversation on investments in infrastructure, two politicians — a governor and a mayor — pressed lawmakers Thursday on the importance of raising revenues to fund necessary transportation improvements across the country. Both officials, Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz and Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti, have at points staked their political careers on raising taxes for infrastructure improvements and emerged victorious.

“It’s usually pretty good advice: Don’t run on raising people’s taxes,” Walz told members of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, “except in the case of infrastructure.”

Walz, a Democrat who served in the U.S. House before becoming governor last month, called for raising the gas tax in Minnesota by 10 cents a gallon as part of his campaign. When his opponent ran TV ads attacking him for the proposal, Walz said his own polling numbers actually went up. “People aren’t begging you to raise their taxes, but the way I framed it was, what is your alternative?” Walz said. Voters, he said, “know they’re spending [the money] anyway” in lost time on congested roads and on car repairs.

Congress has struggled for more than a decade to find money to pay for highways, bridges and other surface transportation infrastructure. Both Republicans and Democrats have shied away from raising the gas tax, the traditional way of funding those improvements. Other areas, including locks and dams on rivers, port dredging, and investments in new air traffic control technology, have languished as well.

But industry experts and their allies in Congress hope infrastructure is one area where Democrats, who now control the House, and Republicans, who control the Senate, can find common ground in the new Congress.

President Donald Trump made a similar point during his State of the Union address on Tuesday.

“Both parties should be able to unite for a great rebuilding of America’s crumbling infrastructure,” Trump said. “I know that the Congress is eager to pass an infrastructure bill, and I am eager to work with you on legislation to deliver new and important infrastructure investment, including investments in the cutting-edge industries of the future. This is not an option. This is a necessity.”

But Trump’s brief mention of infrastructure did not give lawmakers any guidance as to what the

president wanted to see in an infrastructure package, or what, if anything, he would accept as a way to fund the new spending. The White House released an infrastructure plan last year that would have relied on states and local governments to pay for the vast majority of its spending, but that idea went nowhere in Congress. Meanwhile, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell has been skeptical of calls from Democrats to pass a major new infrastructure spending legislation.

That leaves the task of fashioning a new infrastructure plan to the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee. But the most politically dicey question of any new infrastructure plan – how to pay for it – would be up to the House Ways and Means Committee.

How to Rally Voters Around Tax Hikes? 'Keep It Visceral.'

Walz and Garcetti, along with former U.S. transportation secretary Ray LaHood, talked with lawmakers about the nuts-and-bolts of infrastructure concerns, including everything from airport landing fees to state revolving funds to finance local water infrastructure.

But the key to selling the idea to the public, Garcetti said, is to translate all of those policies into real-world changes in people's lives.

"Keep it visceral. Keep it human," he urged. "Don't talk about policies and statistics."

Garcetti noted that he was re-elected even after pushing a half-cent sales tax hike in 2016 to expand rail lines, fix streets and make other transportation improvements in Los Angeles County. The $120 billion ballot measure was the largest local transportation funding measure in U.S. history. But it very nearly failed.

California law required the measure to pass by a two-thirds vote to take effect, because it called for raising taxes. Polling showed that only about 63 percent of potential voters supported it before the campaign launched TV ads. "It was going to be a tough lift," Garcetti told U.S. Rep. Greg Stanton, a former Phoenix mayor. (Stanton successfully ran for re-election as mayor on the same day he pushed a tax increase for light rail expansion and road improvements.)

Garcetti said the Los Angeles ad campaign included the "typical" images and arguments in favor of big infrastructure initiatives: new trains, new roads, workers paving streets and people moving around the city. They explained how many jobs would be created and how much time people would save on their commutes. After two weeks and $5 million worth of ads, support for the measure had dipped to 61 percent, Garcetti said.

"I said, 'Oh no, this thing is going down,'" Garcetti told the committee. "I'd put all my political capital on the line."

Then his campaign consultant suggested a different tack. He told the mayor to get in the car and drive, while the consultant filmed him on his phone. There would be no script.

Not surprisingly, the mayor ran into traffic on the interstate. "Here we are stuck in rush hour traffic," Garcetti says in the video. "The only problem is, it's Saturday afternoon."

The message intrinsically resonated with voters, he told the committee. "Everybody in Los Angeles got that.… They got being stuck in traffic." The measure was approved by 72 percent of voters.

Urging Lawmakers to Act

When it comes to shaping a new federal infrastructure plan, Garcetti encouraged Congress to fund

projects that bring in money from a variety of sources, including states, local governments and private investors. He said that programs should reward agencies that innovate, whether by using new technology or creative financing. And the mayor said federal lawmakers should consider paying part of the cost of maintenance for existing infrastructure, to prevent it from decaying further.

LaHood, a former Republican congressman from Illinois who served in the Obama administration, said lawmakers should not settle for little plans.

“It’s got to be big and it’s got to be bold. It can’t be chintzy,” he said. “Everybody knows what the problem is: America is one big pothole.”

To get a new plan signed into law, LaHood urged the House members to get a signal from the White House about what Trump would agree to in the plan. “If President Trump is not with you on this, it will be very difficult to pass through the Senate. [If president is with you] I think he will sell it in the Senate,” LaHood said.

Earlier this week, transportation committee chair Rep. Peter DeFazio told reporters he had not received a commitment from the White House about what it would support. Further complicating matters, many members on the committee from the greater New York area want the plan to include replacements to the century-old rail tunnels between New Jersey and New York’s Penn Station. But Trump has fought the so-called Gateway Program at every turn.

LaHood urged the lawmakers to move quickly with their plans. “We have a very short window,” he said. “If it doesn’t happen this year, folks, it doesn’t happen until after another presidential campaign.”

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