

Boxer Wants Highway Bill Action in Lame Duck

By [David Harrison](#), CQ Roll Call

Sen. Barbara Boxer is putting pressure on House Republicans to move a long-term highway bill during the lame-duck session.

The California Democrat, who chairs the Senate's Environment and Public Works Committee, wrote [\(PDF\)](#) to House Ways and Means Chairman Dave Camp, R-Mich., Thursday asking that his panel take up a highway bill before the end of the year.

In July, Congress extended highway funding through the end of the May, but many Democrats were unhappy with the measure, saying it punted on problems that need to be tackled right away. Action during the lame duck would also guarantee that Democrats take a leading role in writing the legislation. If November's election delivers the Senate to Republicans, Hill Democrats could find themselves frozen out of highway bill talks next year.

Despite their objections, almost all Democrats, including Boxer, ultimately voted for the longer extension in order to keep funds from drying up.

"I strongly supported a shorter extension to keep the pressure on Congress to work on a long-term funding solution, which would provide the certainty that our states and businesses need," Boxer wrote in her letter.

"We cannot afford to wait for action until the deadline, which falls at the beginning of the critical summer construction season, or to kick the can down the road any longer," she wrote.

But Democratic leaders have yet to coalesce around a highway measure to take up during the lame duck. And Republicans say they will almost certainly oppose doing anything on highway programs until next year, arguing that rushing major legislation through Congress during a six-week, end-of-the-year session is ill-advised.

But a highway funding debate can't wait forever.

On Thursday, the Government Accountability Office released a new [report](#) on the Highway Trust Fund, which reached the broadly accepted view that "Congress and the administration need to agree on a long-term, sustainable plan to fund surface transportation."

But the report, which looked at highway fund grants in fiscal 2013, also contained a few surprises that signal just how far behind the country is in infrastructure construction.

According to GAO, only 10 percent of the money obligated by the Federal Highway Administration for roads and bridges went toward new construction. Most of it went towards maintenance and reconstruction of existing infrastructure that have gotten outdated or that needed increased capacity.

In total, of the roughly \$39 billion allocated to states in the form of FHWA grants, only \$1.8 billion went for building new roads and \$650 million went for building new bridges.