

House Passes \$300 Billion Bill to Improve Roads and Bridges

*No fix, however,
for the financing
problems of a
highway trust fund.*

By DAVID M. HERSZENHORN

WASHINGTON — The House on Thursday overwhelmingly approved a multiyear highway bill that includes more than \$300 billion in transportation and infrastructure programs to address the nation's deteriorating roads and bridges.

The bill, however, still fails to address a chronic shortfall in financing for the Federal Highway Trust Fund, which pays for such projects, and has been the subject of a fierce long-running disagreement over federal tax policy.

The House measure must now be reconciled with a Senate version adopted earlier this year. Like the House bill, the Senate measure included six years of policy prescriptions but only provided about three years' worth of financing.

The vote in the House was 363 to 64. Most of the "no" votes came from hard-line conservative Republicans who were angered that the bill was not fully paid for and that it included a provision to reopen the federal Export-Import Bank.

Some transportation experts also criticized the measure, which they said was too small to address the nation's widespread, and worsening, infrastructure problems. President Obama, in his budget, had called for a larger, \$478 billion program.

Still, authors of the House bill said that it would improve the nation's infrastructure as well as transportation safety. House Republicans also said that the two and a half days of freewheeling floor debate, and consideration of more than 100 amendments, demonstrated Speaker Paul D. Ryan's commitment to running a more inclusive legislative process.

Mr. Ryan, at a news conference in the Capitol, hailed the passage of the bill.

"We just completed the work on a bipartisan highway bill," he said. "It cuts waste. It prioritizes good infrastructure. It will help create good-paying jobs. And it is the result of a more open process."

"Over these last four days, the House has debated more amendments than in the last four months combined," Mr. Ryan said, adding, "This is a good start. It's a glimpse of how we should be doing the people's business."

Still, critics said the insufficient financing in the bill represented a longstanding failure by Congress and recent administrations to maintain the nation's transportation systems, and to invest in much-needed enhancements.

The shortage of financing reflects a continuing disagreement in Washington over how to replenish the Highway Trust Fund, which is funded largely by a federal gas tax. The tax was last increased in 1993 and is not indexed to inflation.

That, together with greater fuel efficiency of modern cars, has led to shortfalls of more than \$70 billion since 2008, which Congress has covered with general funds.

And while the House did engage in far more open debate than it has been in recent years, Republican leaders blocked amendments that would have increased the gas tax — a move they oppose but many business groups support.

The debate on the floor was managed by Representative Bill Shuster, Republican of Pennsylvania and chairman of the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, following the footsteps of his father, former Representative Bud Shuster, who was chairman of the same committee from 1995 to 2001.

In a statement, the younger Mr. Shuster praised the House for approving his bill. "Today the

House voted to give our infrastructure and our economy a much-needed shot in the arm," he said.

Representative Peter A. DeFazio of Oregon, the senior Democrat on the committee, also praised the outcome but expressed concern about the insufficient financing.

"I am very pleased, that after 10 years of short-term Band-Aids and extensions, the House finally passed a bipartisan, six-year transportation bill," Mr. DeFazio said in a statement. "This legislation isn't perfect. Unfortunately, it doesn't provide the level of investment needed to repair or rebuild our aging 1950s-era system of roads, bridges and public transit systems."

Still, Mr. DeFazio said the bill provides a framework that would make good use of additional money if Congress and the president provide it.

Others saw deeper shortcomings. "I see it as a huge missed opportunity," said Kevin DeGood, director of infrastructure policy at the Center for American Progress, a left-leaning policy group in Washington.

He said the bill failed to provide money for passenger rail capital projects and also fell short by not encouraging a more modern, efficient freight policy.

Hard-line conservative Republicans were infuriated by the provision to restart the Export-Import Bank, but their opposition seemed futile given that a huge bipartisan majority in the House had voted to approve a separate measure that would also reopen the bank.

La Camera approva un disegno di legge da 300 miliardi di dollari per migliorare le strade e i ponti



Still, the conservatives pushed a number of amendments aimed at weakening the bank should it reopen. Those amendments were rejected.

Separately on Thursday, the House voted again to approve the annual military policy bill, which President Obama vetoed last month in a fight with congressional Republicans over spending.

The spending fight was ultimately resolved in a budget agreement that Mr. Obama signed on Monday. But there are still points of disagreement in the military bill, particularly a Republican provision that keeps in place a ban on bringing prisoners from the detention center at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, into the United States, even for prosecution or continued detention in another prison. It also would tighten restrictions on transferring detainees to other countries.

Mr. Obama's plan to close the prison, an unfulfilled promise of his presidency, calls for transferring 53 of the remaining detainees and bringing the other 61 to a prison on domestic soil.

The White House on Wednesday declined to say whether Mr. Obama would veto a second version of the military policy bill over Guantánamo, which he has objected to in past years but ultimately signed into law.

Josh Earnest, the White House press secretary, said on Wednesday that the provisions were "a really bad idea," but added: "We'll have to take a look at exactly what passes Congress before making a determination about what the president will sign."

The Senate is also expected to readopt the military measure, though a vote is not yet scheduled.

Also on Thursday, Senate Democrats blocked Republicans from taking up the annual military appropriations bill. Some Democrats fear that despite the recent budget agreement, Republicans would gladly approve increased military spending but then refuse to carry out other aspects of the budget accord.

Julie Hirschfeld Davis contributed reporting.