

Federal Transportation Bill To Benefit Vermont

U.S. Senator Jim Jeffords serves as the ranking member of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee. In that capacity he worked for more than three years to pass the \$286.5 billion federal highway bill, which authorizes federal transportation funding through 2009. In the end, the Safe, Accountable, Flexible and Efficient Transportation Equity Act of 2005 (SAFETEA) was passed in the House by a vote of 412 to 8 and in the Senate by a 94 to 4 margin.

Pursuant to the legislation, Vermont's share of total highway dollars will increase from an average of \$125 million a year now, to \$175 million a year through 2009, for a total increase of \$250 million over the five years. This represents a 40 percent increase in funding for Vermont. Vermont will receive more than \$1 billion over the five-year period, when specific projects are included in the tally.

“This highway bill makes the biggest federal investment in Vermont’s road and bridges in history. It will make Vermont’s roads safer and less congested and bring new jobs and resources to our state for years to come. Every region of Vermont will benefit from this legislation,” said Jeffords.

The bill is enormous. (I am scared to attempt to download it to my computer). In addition to the straight financial aspects of the law, there are sections amending or adding to virtually any transportation-related subject one could imagine. There are sections on recreational trails, emergency relief real-time system management information programs, truck parking facilities, public transit, highway safety, safe routes to school, seat belts, ferries, scenic byways, racial profiling, buy America, bicycle transportation, pedestrian walkways, brownfields, and much more.

Of interest to municipalities is the “Safe Routes to School” program that will provide \$612 million to develop, implement, and encourage the use of safe ways for children to walk or bike to school and the “High Risk Rural Roads” program that will focus \$360 million on the particular needs of rural communities and reducing risks to rural drivers. Vermont will receive an average 40 percent increase in funding for apportioned programs such as interstate maintenance, surface transportation, recreational trails, and the new highway safety improvement program.

The difficulty for Vermont will be finding state dollars to meet matching requirements for drawing down the available federal dollars. Estimates are that Vermont will need to find an additional \$13-18 million in order to match and be able to use all federal dollars made available to Vermont in SAFETEA. Not many options are available to the Legislature, and leaving money on the table is never a popular choice. Watch for information on this problem as the 2006 legislative session nears.

- Karen Horn, Director, VLCT Public Policy and Advocacy Services

(Editor’s Note: For a list, organized by county, of Vermont transportation projects included in SAFETEA, please e-mail kroe@vlct.org.)