

Nixon Signs \$22 Billion Highway Bill

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President Nixon signed a compromise \$22.9 billion highway aid measure yesterday that for the first time frees highway trust funds for use in mass transportation systems.

The legislation was hailed by the President as a sign of "constructive cooperation" with Congress and by his counselor, Melvin R. Laird, as an indication that the administration is not paralyzed by the Watergate scandal.

"It is important to bear in mind that we are moving forward on the domestic agenda for America," Laird said.

The most significant feature

of the new three-year legislation is that it unlocks the \$6 billion highway trust fund derived from gasoline and tire taxes. Since this fund's inception in 1957, it has been used exclusively for highway building, principally for the interstate highway system which is now 83 per cent complete.

The bill will provide \$200 million to cities for purchasing buses in the second year of the legislation and another \$800 million to cities for buying buses or for use in building subways or other rail systems in the third year. While this sum is a small one in comparison to the cost of subway systems, the legislation also

provides \$3 billion out of general funds for direct grants to urban-mass transit projects.

State and local officials may substitute mass transit projects for controversial, unbuilt interstate highway links, several of which have been blocked by environmental groups.

Fundamentally, the bill is a compromise between an urban-environmentalist coalition that sought to free highway trust monies for mass transit and automobile, road-building and oil lobbyists who have for the past decade successfully resisted any diversion of trust funds from highways to mass transit.

Though relatively few trust fund dollars will actually be diverted, the compromise is probably on balance a victory for the urban and environmentalist lobbyists because of the important precedent it establishes of using the trust funds for mass transit purposes.

Mindful that the compromise has been represented as a victory on all sides, Transportation Secretary Claude S. Brinegar was careful to describe the new measure as a triumph of "flexibility" for transportation planners.

"We do not see such flexibility as a 'busting of the trust'

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but rather as a sensible broadening of its uses," Brinegar said at a White House briefing.

It is a sign of the times, however, that the once-sacrosanct highway trust was described in irreverent terms by President Nixon, who commented during the bill-signing ceremony that "the dullest thing in the world is to spend a day on a superhighway."

"Under this act for the first time states and localities will have the flexibility they need to set their own transportation priorities," Mr. Nixon said.

He called the diversion of highway trust monies to mass transit "a landmark provision" that will allow states and local governments to set their own priorities.

"The law will enable them at last to relieve congestion and pollution problems by developing more balanced transportation systems where that is appropriate, rather than locking them into further highway expenditures which can sometimes make such problems even worse," he said.

Two emerging and related

administration themes dominated the ceremonies and announcements surrounding the bill signing. One is the developing White House praise for Congress on non-Watergate issues, the other the reiteration of administration belief in its own ability to govern.

Brinegar, therefore, spoke of the "encouraging and gratifying accomplishment" of Congress in working out a compromise while Laird talked of the administration "facing up to the domestic agenda."

Among the major allocations of the bill, in addition to the mass transit funds, are \$8.6 billion to bring the interstate highway system near completion, \$3.3 billion for rural primary and secondary urban highways and \$2 billion for roads, another \$3.3 billion for highway safety programs.

For the first time, the highway legislation aids the bicycle rider, who was described by Brinegar as "perhaps the ultimate in the efficient usage of energy," by allocating \$120 million from the trust fund for construction of bicycle paths adjacent to highway projects.