

CONGRESSIONAL AFFAIRS

In Lobbying Blitz, Highway Builders Try to Pave Way to a Chunk of Stimulus

BY BENNETT ROTH, CQ STAFF WRITER

Hoping to nab a healthy chunk of the economic stimulus package, the highway construction industry has ratcheted up its lobbying in a multipronged approach that includes a media blitz, visits to congressional offices and prodding employees around the nation to contact their lawmakers.

The large associations that represent companies involved in transportation construction are moving fast to update their members about key congressional action on the stimulus package (HR 1), which is set for a vote this week in the Senate.

"CALL OR WRITE YOUR SENATORS!!! Tell them to support amendments increasing transportation funding in the stimulus package," the National Stone, Sand and Gravel Association urged members in a Web site alert after the House approved the measure last week.

The push reflects how individual sectors are pulling out the stops as they respond to the troubled economy by seeking a greater piece of the huge stimulus package, including funneling more money to the Democrats now in power.



Patty Murray

However, getting more highway money is proving to be an uphill battle. On Tuesday, for example, Senate Democrats fell two votes short of getting the 60 votes needed to waive a budgetary point of order on an amendment, sponsored by Patty Murray, D-Wash., that would have increased highway spending in the Senate legislation from \$27 billion to \$40 billion. The proposed waiver drew the support of only two Republicans.

Pamela Whitted, the vice president of government affairs for the National Stone, Sand and Gravel Association, said that much of her group's efforts this week will be talking to Republican senators, because "they seem to be the ones that have the most problems" with the stimulus package.

Groups have been gearing up to push for more highway money since the stimulus idea was first hatched. The American Road and

Transportation Builders Association (ARTBA), an umbrella group for many construction firms, spent \$306,408 on federal lobbying in the last six months of 2008, compared with \$245,000 in the first half of the year, according to lobbying reports filed with Congress. ARTBA began preparing for stimulus legislation in August, and association officials testified before the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee in October.

"The stimulus legislation will provide a key down payment toward addressing the greater transportation infrastructure issues we face," said ARTBA spokesman Jeff Solsby. The group also lobbied for the financial bailout package passed into law last fall (PL 110-343) to alleviate the impact of the tightening credit market on the transportation construction industry. Most members of the in-house lobbying team for the ARTBA have previously worked on Capitol Hill.

Solsby's group has launched a joint bipartisan lobbying effort with labor unions and other construction industries that includes targeted advertising in publications that reach inside-the-Beltway audiences

Lobby continued on page 25

Lobby *continued from page 5*

(including Congressional Quarterly).

But the lobbying effort is also taking place outside Washington, where many construction firms have been hurt by shrinking state budgets. Just before the House voted last week on the stimulus legislation, Wagman, a company that has a highway construction subsidiary and is based in York, Pa., urged its employees to contact their lawmakers to support the bill. The firm even encouraged employees to make those contacts on company time.

"We tell them, 'This directly affects your job,'" said Lisa Wagman Glezer, the company's public relations manager and granddaughter of its founder, George A. Wagman. Glezer said that despite being based in Pennsylvania, the company has been unable to secure highway contracts in the state lately and must rely on work from Maryland, including the reconstruction of the Woodrow Wilson Bridge over the Potomac River. She said many of the Pennsylvania-based employees would like to come back home to do their jobs.

While Wagman's employees do much of their lobbying from a distance, others are roaming the halls of the Capitol, hoping to change minds.

Last week Whitted's group met with the staff of Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., as well as with Sen. Lamar Alexander, R-Tenn., who is on the Transportation Appropriations Subcommittee. They also met with Murray, who also sits on that panel.



Lamar Alexander

Congress will contact them as well. Other employees are urged through the e-mail alerts to call congressional offices.

Although a number of Republicans said they supported more funds for infrastructure, they want to remove some of the money for social programs that they argue would not immediately provide a boost to the economy.

"If we are going to have a stimulus package, we ought to build roads and bridges and dams and a few other things to create jobs in the first few months. That makes good sense," said Alexander. But Alexander opposed Murray's amendment to increase highway funding because it did not include cuts in social program spending.

"The problem is, only about \$135 billion of the \$900 billion is actually stimulus. The rest is borrowing money, an extraordinary amount of money, for programs that don't stimulate the economy," Alexander said.

Sen. Arlen Specter, R-Pa., one of two Republicans who voted for the infrastructure amendment, said he had put aside misgivings that additional highway money was not

Whitted said that in addition to lobbyist visits, the group has initiated what they call a "grass-tops" program—as opposed to grass-roots—where executives of large companies who personally know members of

offset with savings because he had been told by Pennsylvania Gov. Edward G. Rendell that the highway projects would be ready to go within six months. "I think this is what the stimulus ought to be doing," said Specter.

Later Specter said his support of the amendment was not affected by any lobbying from back home, where the moderate Republican faces re-election in 2010.

"I understand the issue," Specter said.

Democrats said they are aware of the industry's pleas for help, too. "We know our construction workers are suffering. We know our construction companies are suffering," said Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif.

Even as they try to encourage Republicans to support the overall stimulus package, the highway industry has become more financially supportive of Democrats than in the past.

For example, 32.9 percent of the federal contributions by the National Stone, Sand and Gravel Association's political action committee went to Democrats in the 2008 election cycle, according to the Center for Responsive Politics, a watchdog group. In the 2004 election cycle, only 23.1 percent of the PAC's contributions went to Democrats.

The reversal in giving patterns was even more stark at the American Road and Transportation Builders Association, whose PAC gave 58.4 percent of its contributions to Democrats in the 2008 election cycle. Four years earlier, that transportation group gave only 30.9 percent of its contributions to Democrats.

Solsby, the spokesman for ARTBA, said the change in giving "reflects who is in charge in Congress. There has been a shift in leadership."

Among the largest of ARTBA's political contributions in 2008 was \$6,000 to Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, which is responsible for crafting much of the stimulus package.

The concerted lobbying effort does not always pay off immediately. Rep. Todd R. Platts, R-Pa., whose district includes the city of York, where the Wagman headquarters is, voted against the stimulus package. Platts spoke to company employees on Tuesday at a meet-and-greet session. Glezer said the congressman explained his vote by saying that he wanted a greater percentage of the stimulus package devoted to transportation projects. Platts did not respond to an interview request.

Nevertheless, Glezer said she hopes that stimulus package is passed by Congress. Said Glezer: "We're ready." ♦