

# Follow The Money: Transportation Funding in Tallahassee and Washington

BY DOUG CALLAWAY, FLORIDIANS FOR BETTER TRANSPORTATION

In one memorable scene from "All The President's Men," the famous 1976 motion picture about Watergate, *Washington Post* reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein meet with a silhouetted figure in a dimly-lit parking garage. This shadowy person, known only as "Deep Throat," apparently has inside knowledge of Watergate activities associated with the Nixon re-election effort and these reporters desperately want his guidance. Deep Throat's sage advice to Woodward and Bernstein was simple – "follow the money."

Follow the money... that same wisdom still applies today when it comes to transportation legislation in either Tallahassee or Washington, DC. All sorts of "urgent" or "essential" issues compete for time and attention, but one can always stay focused on the MAIN THING if one just "follows the money."



## TRANSPORTATION FUNDING: TALLAHASSEE STYLE

In January, Governor Jeb Bush proposed a budget for 2004-05 that sought to "sweep" \$100 million out of the Transportation Trust Fund. Coming on the heels of last year's \$200 million diversion, the Governor's proposal fails to keep faith with the TAXPAYERS who paid this money in the first place—our state's transportation users. Simply put, they paid this "user fee" exclusively for TRANSPORTATION.

Aside from that fundamental principle, here are three quick reasons why state transportation dollars, collected from motorists right here in Florida, should be spent for transportation purposes only:

- According to FDOT, every transportation dollar "invested" yields \$5.50 in economic benefit,

- According to a presentation before the Florida Transportation Commission in March 2003, Florida needs an additional \$2.7 billion annually... just to maintain our current levels of transportation service, and
- According to the Texas Transportation Institute, congestion in some Florida cities, like Orlando, is now **worse** than in New York City.

Anticipating another multi-million dollar "raid" on the Transportation Trust Fund, last fall Floridians for Better Transportation (FBT), the Florida Institute of Consulting Engineers (FICE), the Florida Chamber of Commerce, the Florida Transportation Builders Association (FTBA), and others started the "STOP Highway Robbery" lobbying blitz. In the first phase of this effort 1,400 e-mails were generated to the Governor and Legislature, as well as hundreds of letters, and thousands of STOP Highway Robbery bumper stickers that were distributed far-and-wide.

The second phase of the STOP Highway Robbery campaign focused on the "Transportation Trust Fund Protection" or TRU\$T Pledge. Signers of this Pledge promise to oppose efforts to "redirect, raid, divert, or sweep" dollars from the State Transportation Trust Fund. Every Legislator was encouraged to sign this expression of fiscal responsibility and transportation trustworthiness. Currently, 44 Florida Legislators have signed the TRU\$T Pledge—including 25 from the 40-member Florida Senate.

Next, in a February letter to each Legislator, the Florida Chamber of Commerce put House and Senate members on notice that any vote to divert transportation dollars from the Transportation Trust Fund would be regarded as a vote against the Chamber's "Florida Business Agenda." Consequently, the Chamber promised to score such votes accordingly when their 2004 Legislative

Report Card is issued this summer.

Clearly, the Florida business community "gets it." They understand the vital and historic connection between transportation investments and economic development in our state. We all must "get" the fact that our quality of life is tied to transportation funding. Divert \$100 million OUT of the Transportation Trust Fund this year, and not only is our economy damaged... but so is the very quality of life we all value so much.

When this article went to press, House and Senate budgets for 2004-05 had just been released. The Senate's budget does NOT include a \$100 million transportation trust fund diversion, but the House budget does. By the time you read this, it should be all over and, hopefully, a final decision to save the \$100 million will have been made.



**Transportation Trust Fund  
Protection Pledge**

*Recognizing that Florida's transportation system – our highways, bridges, airports, seaports, railroads, bus and rail transit systems – is the backbone of our state's economy and the very foundation upon which our quality of life rests ...*

I, \_\_\_\_\_, pledge to the transportation users of the \_\_\_\_\_ district of the State of Florida, and to the people of this state that I will oppose and vote against any and all efforts to "redirect, raid, divert or sweep" dollars from the State Transportation Trust Fund.

## TRANSPORTATION DOLLARS IN DC

Under the existing federal transportation law known as TEA-21 (Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century), Florida only receives 86 cents back for every federal gas tax dollar collected here and sent to Washington, DC. But those 86 cents

equate to about \$1.3 billion annually, so the big push has been to improve that figure to 95 cents.

TEA-21 expired on September 30, 2003 and the initial 5 month extension expired on February 29<sup>th</sup>, the same day President Bush signed federal legislation extending the highway and transit programs yet again until April 30, 2004. Indications are that a final bill will be produced before this latest deadline.

On February 12<sup>th</sup>, the Senate passed SAFETEA (S. 1072), a six-year bill with a total funding level of \$318 billion. The Senate bill is much HIGHER than the Administration's proposed bill at \$256 billion, yet it passed by a veto-proof margin of 76-21.

TEA-LU (H.R. 3550), the legislation proposed by the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, was initially pegged at an even higher funding level and would have provided \$375 billion over six years. This overall funding level was later reduced to about \$275 billion in committee, and H.R. 3550 was passed by the full House on April 2<sup>nd</sup>. Ironically, in the House of Representatives, where donor states were expected to have their greatest

strength, election year politics forced donor states to fight just to maintain the status quo. So much for the goal of a 95% return.

The Bush Administration has indicated that the President would veto any bill higher than the \$256 billion level of their proposed legislation. At \$275 and \$318 billion respectively, BOTH the House and Senate bills are currently above this threshold. Therefore, it is impossible to predict with certainty what will finally happen or when.

### SHOW ME THE MONEY

At the beginning of this piece, the movie "All The President's Men" was mentioned and the famous phrase "follow the money" cited. But in a more recent film, "Jerry Maguire," an even more familiar line of financial dialogue was uttered... "show me the money!" Whether we're talking about Tallahassee or Washington, DC, for Florida the bottom line is simple—we need to "see" the money.

We need to keep our state transportation dollars where they belong – in the State Transportation Trust Fund – and use them for transportation. And we need to get more of OUR federal transportation dollars

back from Washington, DC, so we can meet the enormous transportation needs confronting our state right now. Show us the (transportation) money now, because to do any less is to cheat our transportation taxpayers and hurt the state we love. ■



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