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THE BUZZ

The Buzz

Senate reaches roads deal without a gas-tax hike

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COLUMBIA

The state Senate is close to a deal that would spend an added \$400 million a year to repair crumbling S.C. roads without raising the gas tax or cutting income taxes.

The tax proposals have stymied efforts to repair roads since last year, when Gov. Nikki Haley first proposed swapping a gas-tax increase for far larger income tax cuts.

That gridlock continued for most of Wednesday, until GOP senators offered a new roads plan. In a rare, party-line vote, the GOP forced the almost-year-long roads debate to an abrupt conclusion by allowing no more amendments and only 10 minutes of debate on each proposed change.

The move infuriated Democrats, who usually wield significant power in the Senate by forging alliances with one of the body's two GOP factions. Senate President Pro Tempore Hugh Leatherman, R-Florence, was among those who voted to bring the end debate. Leatherman usually is an ally to Democrats, whose votes helped elect him Senate leader.

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But after lengthy, sometimes heated negotiations, Senate Minority Leader Nikki Setzler, D-Lexington, extended an olive branch and made a motion agreeing to move forward Thursday on the GOP's newly offered proposal.

Democrats will have a chance Thursday to offer changes to that bill as a result of the agreement.

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“The people of South Carolina want a legitimate discussion of all the issues dealing with the roads of South Carolina. They want their potholes fixed,” Setzler said, adding Democrats have no intention of filibustering.

Some GOP senators have held the floor on a roads bill since last year, refusing to raise the gas tax. They argued lawmakers have more \$1 billion in news state revenue to spend this year and should use some of it to fix roads.

Others in the Senate have argued the state has other pressing need, including spending more on rural schools in response to a Supreme Court ruling.

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State Sen. Tom Davis, R-Beaufort, who led the GOP filibuster against a gas-tax hike, said he supported the GOP proposal offered Wednesday.

The \$400 million spending plan also would reform the state Transportation Department, shifting power to appoint members of its governing commission to the governor, away from state legislators. With advice from the governor, the commission would appoint the state transportation secretary.

The controversial State Transportation Infrastructure Bank also would be made answerable to the Transportation Department. Critics charge the bank underwrites road projects based on legislators' political clout, not the state's needs.

Senate Majority Leader Harvey Peeler, R-Cherokee called the new roads proposal a "great victory," saying it satisfies gas-tax opponents, DOT-reformers and adds money to pay for the roads.

Transportation Secretary Christy Hall who watched the debate unfold said the proposal would "absolutely" help the Transportation Department, effectively doubling the amount of state money the agency receives annually to fix roads.

However, \$400 million a year is far less than the added \$1.2 billion a year that Hall said previously was needed to fix the state's roads and alleviate congestion.

The roads debate has been intensifying. Advocacy groups have been robo-calling legislators' constituents, encouraging them to pressure their senators to pass a roads bill or, alternately, oppose a gas-tax increase.

Earlier Wednesday, S.C. Gov. Nikki Haley blamed Senate leader Leatherman for holding up progress on fixing the state's roads, as renegade Republicans — led by

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last year, said “any bill the Senate sends to the House is a positive.” Differences between the House and Senate roads plans can be worked out, he added.

“The people of South Carolina want their roads fixed.”

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