From the GLR ASHE Political Information Network

2020 March PIN Update

After the Super Tuesday election, the democratic field of candidates have shrunk to just two candidates, former Vice President Joe Bidden and Senator Bernie Sanders. The Biden transportation plan proposes to immediately spend $50 billion over the first year of his Administration to kickstart the process of repairing our existing roads, highways, and bridges. In addition to sending these funds to states, some of the dollars will go directly to cities and towns that own and run most of our roads. Biden will also expedite permitting, so that projects can break ground faster. However, a funding plan on where the new revenues will come from has not been put forth for highway spending. Biden did not mention the use of an Infrastructure Bank, but wants to utilize the federal loan program and to improve and streamline the loan process for rail infrastructure. Biden wants to focus on the Northeast Corridor on higher speeds that will shrink the travel time from D.C. to New York by half and completing the California High Speed Rail project. He wants to build high speed rail system that will connect the coasts for both passenger and freight transportation. Biden supports infrastructure for pedestrians, cyclists, riders of e-scooters, and other micro-mobility vehicles.

Sanders' January 2015 infrastructure bill (S. 268, 114th Congress) would have transferred $600 billion over eight years from the general fund to the Highway Trust Fund, which would have allowed $425 billion in above-baseline spending in addition to ensuring baseline solvency. His plan did not mention of the federal loan program but a Sanders proposes the creation a National Infrastructure Bank to make loans, capitalized with $25 billion in budget authority. Sanders plans on spending $607 billion investment in a regional high-speed rail system would complete the vision of the Obama administration to develop high-speed intercity rail in the United States however, the plan makes no mention of freight rail. The Sanders plan does not mention pedestrians, cyclists, riders of e-scooters, and other micro-mobility vehicles.

Neither democratic candidate mentioned of bond financing, the gas users fee, or the vehicle miles traveled as options for funding of their transportation plan.

President Trump's transportation plan has not changed since it was presented a few years ago. As you recall, his outline for a new infrastructure bill is not limited to transportation projects, but includes all infrastructure, including water ports, airports, and railroad, to name a few. The outline calls for $200B in federal funding over the next 10 years. This money is divided into of pots of $100B each. The first pot is assigned to standard funding mandated by law, such as the Highway Trust programs. This funding would continue to utilize the traditional 80-20 funding split. However, it is the other $100B that has everyone talking. This outline lays out new ideas, where public-private partnership and non-traditional funding sources can shine. The Infrastructure Incentive Initiative program would only provide a 20% federal match, requiring the locals to come up with the 80% match for core infrastructure projects. Rural infrastructure would be a focus with investments to facilitate freight movements, to improved access to reliable and affordable transportation, and to improve access to high-speed broadband. The Transformative Project Programs would provide $20B for innovative projects not currently supported by the market, such as Hyperloop. The TIFFIA program would be expanded to provide funding for water port and airport infrastructure. Passenger facility charges at airports and rail facilities would be expanded for the good of those facilities. Private Activity Bonds, comparable to municipal bonds, could be used for broadband, flood control, and energy projects. Tolling for new road expansion and rest area commercialization could aid interstate projects. Capital Investment Grants can have a 50% match for transit purposes. While these new funding ideas were presented, streamlining processes was also addressed. Projects requiring only a 20% federal match would not be required to follow federal processes. The NEPA timeline would be altered as well, in that utilities could be relocated and right of way acquisition could start in advance of a final NEPA approval. An environmental challenge to a NEPA ruling is limited to 150 days instead of 3 years. While this outline presents new ideas, it lacked what everyone was hoping for, a funding stream solution. President Trump said that he would support a 25-cent increase in the gas users fee.

While there is rumors of a transportation bill passing Congress this year, the ASHE PIN believes it is doubtful as bills like this have trouble going through all of the steps necessary during election year. In 2021, the highway industry will be starting over again with new legislators and possibly a new president. We urge you to review each possible candidate and their plan for transportation so that you can make a wise voting decision in November.