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# Don't block the goal

With precious money on the line, the feds need to let go

I considered giving LeBron James an offer. Yes, for a split second I thought the NBA super forward would be a solid fit for this editorial page. Beyond the slashes in the paint and the fan-appreciation dunks I believe there is a mind that wraps itself around this highway bill reauthorization conundrum on a daily basis. In fact, every time he clanks a shot I am convinced it is because he is momentarily caught up in material costs and gas-tax receipts.

However, by the time those other splits of that tick played out, James was already an afterthought. After all, it would require Cleveland's estranged son to close the column out—and we all know how well he does in that regard.

No one on Capitol Hill deserved to snicker at that last remark, because, like James, none of them is demanding this ball of highway-funding debate as the clock of economic apocalypse heads to zero. And as states like Pennsylvania, still in a frenzied full-court press as it tries to make up the money lost when the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) denied its latest I-80 tolling application, and Missouri, which has been forced to pass instead of shoot (its latest five-year transportation plan will operate at one-third of the 2010 level), the reality is many believe Congress is just going to spend the next two years watching from the sidelines.

According to Americans for Tax Reform, 173 current members of the U.S. House of Representatives and 412 candidates for seats, along with 33 senators and 70 aspiring senators, have signed something called a Taxpayer Protection Pledge. Suddenly, the politicians have religion, and spending accountability is the new testament to this country's well-being. Some also are saying if Republicans do regain control of the House after the November elections then Rep. Jim Oberstar (D-Minn.), along with his \$500 billion highway-spending plan, will be just a towel boy in the huddle of political power. Rep. John Mica (R-Fla.) would then own this Transportation and Infrastructure Committee team.

Now, an oath can be overcome, because we all know the winking tendencies of the bureaucrats, but the threat of a Mica takeover is deeply concerning. After all, this is the same Mica who

earlier this year suggested increasing a sales tax over the gas tax. Do not even attempt to read those last few words again—it's not worth your time to try and make sense of it all.

The tomfoolery at the federal level again stresses my point as to how this transportation bailout will fall on the states' shoulders this time around. Pennsylvania, which is facing a \$3.5 billion gap in the coming years, has decided to coach itself through this scoring drought. The state is joining California and Florida (Are we obnoxious enough to label them the Big 3?) in asking the FHWA to allow advertising on overhead and variable message signs. The move, according to Pennsylvania DOT spokesman Rich Kirkpatrick, could create more than \$150 million of state transportation dollars annually.

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As usual, opponents are lining up. Many come from Team Safety, which claims this new move will create a driver distraction. Well, let's go over the current attention-grabbers out on the road: existing billboards (digital and standard), other drivers, cell phones, radios, children in the car, a flock of geese flying overhead, accidents, and the list goes on. Is one more element really going to put us over the edge?

Whether we end up passing another six-year bill or not, those at the state level must continue to seek out alternative forms of financing, and if money brought in from overhead and variable message sign advertising improves the network, with safety being the biggest benefactor, then the FHWA should not stand in their way. If it does, then somebody needs to cry foul. **R&B**