"The Highway Boys Win Another One"

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By ALBERT R. KARR

WASHINGTON — A while back, a man from Peoria called in with a problem.

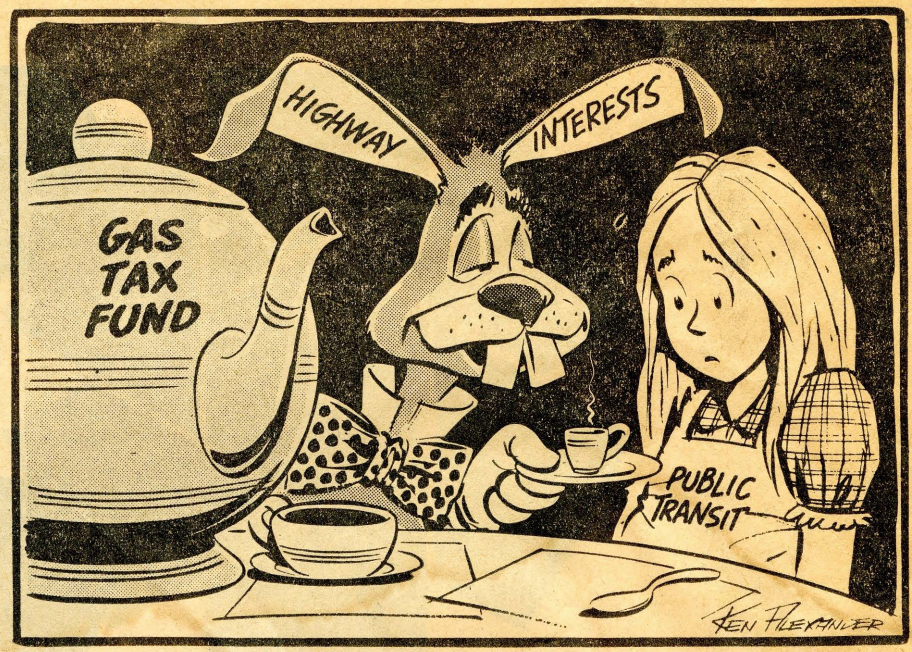
He had tried to find The Highway Lobby in the telephone directory—he had even called the information operator—and he couldn't find it anywhere. The man from Peoria—not exactly a disinterested party, since he worked for Caterpillar Tractor Co., maker of road-making machinery—was inclined to doubt The Highway Lobby existed.

Here's news for the man from Peoria. The highway lobby exists. It's in Washington—big as life, vigorous and fresh from one of its greatest victories.

In a convincing display of power, the lobby last week engineered the defeat of a House proposal to tap the $5 billion Highway Trust Fund for up to $700 million (a year) for rail and bus transit projects. The Senate has passed a similar bill. It's remotely possible that the lobby could still lose, or be forced to compromise, when a House-Senate conference committee meets to reconcile the two bills. Even so, the effort it has mounted in recent weeks would still be impressive.

One anti-highway man counted nearly 30 highway lobbyists working the corridors of Capitol Hill as the House proposal headed toward a vote recently. Moreover, a contractors group, the Committee for Action, already has reported contributing $74,400 in recent months to more than 60 political candidates. The contributions include $1,500 to Sen. Jennings Randolph, the West Virginia Democrat who chairs the Senate Public Works Committee and $1,000 to John S. Blatnik, the Minnesota Democrat who chairs the House Public Works Committee.

So far the Truck Operators Non-Partisan Committee has reported no donations. But if the rumors of donations proffered to House members during the recent debate are any indication, the truckers won't be sitting on their money for long.



"Take some more tea," the March Hare said to Alice.
"I've had nothing yet," Alice replied, "so I can't take more."
"You mean you can't take less. It's very easy to take more than nothing," said the March Hare.

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Nixonites have worked hard to persuade pro-highway members of Congress that the administration isn't out to sabotage the trust fund, just to relieve urban congestion and alleviate such environmental problems as air pollution. But when the administration's pro-transit proposal came to its House test this year, the pro-highway lobbyists were working against it much harder than the pro-transit advocates were working for it. The transit interests apparently decided in advance that

'Pulled Out All the Stops'

On at least two occasions in recent days, the truckers were reported offering campaign-contributions checks to members of House committees as key votes approached on the highway measure. When the House public works panel was to register its stand on the trust-fund diversion plan (it wound up rejecting the plan 26-10), some of the trucker offers amounted to "a couple of thousand dollars at a crack," says an observer. "They pulled out all the stops."

Indeed, the truckers were at the forefront of a highway lobbying effort as the legislation wended its way through the House. Also pitching in were roadbuilders, limestone producers, and even House Public Works Committee members, themselves a strong element in the lobby.

Later, more trucker offers were made when the Rules Committee took up a parliamentary question vital to passage of the bill. The highway lobbyists wanted the committee to rule that any amendment from the House floor to tap the trust fund for mass transit would be out of order. The committee ruled accordingly.

Last Thursday when the bill came up on the House floor, the lobby's "presence was felt all over," an administration official says.

Then, after the Rules Committee, prodded by highway lobbyists, ruled last week that the mass-transit amendment wasn't germane to the bill and thus couldn't be taken up on the House floor, the lobbyists temporarily met a roadblock; the administration got the House parliamentarian to agree to overrule that committee, thereby freeing the fund-diversion proposal for House consideration on its merits.

So the highway men went to work again. The House parliamentarian was instructed to uphold the point of order. He did, the House backed him up in a procedural vote, and the pro-transit plan was dead in the House for this session.

The sometimes-heavy hand of the lobby is expected to be evident when House and Senate conferees join this week to work out a compromise between the two versions of the bill. And the lobby may do very well, partly because the conference committee itself will, in effect, be stacked in its favor. The House members on the committee will be flatly opposed to aiding mass transit, and some of the Senators on it are more pro-highway than the Senate as a whole.

If the anti-transit view does win out in conference, the prospects of a veto of the entire bill by President Nixon are very real, says a Transportation Department official. The administration, through Transportation Secretary Volpe, fought for the pro-transit provision of the bill, and the House vote represents a major defeat for Mr. Volpe. Moreover, the department official says, there are a number of other provisions objectionable to the administration in both the House-passed and Senate-passed measures.

The matter may not get to the President's desk, however. Some sources deeply enmeshed in the legislative battle say the conferees may well be unable to resolve differences by the end of the week, when Congress plans to adjourn. That could mean there won't be a new highway act this session; when the new Congress convenes in January, the anti-highway forces think they can win out in a new trust-fund diversion push, especially because the Rules Committee makeup will be different. Also some environmental groups plan to work for the defeat of some of the Congressmen who voted against diversion, in the coming election.

Still Optimistic

Still, despite their defeat this time around, the pro-transit forces are optimistic over the long haul.

They say, for instance, that a more radical plan to permit diversion of nearly $2½ billion from the fund for transit might have gone somewhere in the Senate this year were it not for the more modest Volpe proposal the Senate ultimately backed. Mr. Volpe was warning last week that if the modest step he proposed isn't supported, the highway men would only "encourage the extremists who want to abolish the trust fund altogether." An administration man adds, "I think we're going to see increasing pressure for that." The highway lobby's impressive effort in recent weeks was "a dying gasp," he maintains.

Public calls for less emphasis on roadbuilding and more on transit have been growing for years, spearheaded by environmental and urban-oriented groups and reinforced by now by a growing list of mayors and governors. Assuming Mr. Nixon's reelection, the White House plans to push again for a formula similar to—or tougher than—the one the House rejected this year.

The lobby already has lost much of its clout in the Senate. This year, even the Senate roads subcommittee barely defeated a proposal to use trust fund money for mass transit; the vote was 8 to 7, a rare event for a pro-highway committee that often votes unanimously. The subcommittee did authorize trust fund money for bus transit systems. And

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The pro-transit forces think the highway lobbyists would be wise to compromise ("They just can't seem to see the handwriting on the wall," an administration officials says). One possible compromise would be to fatten the trust fund with new taxes, then use the fund to aid both roadbuilding and transit. But compromise didn't enter into the lobby's plans this year, even though the lobby's united front has broken down a bit of late.

Even as the pro-transit proposal was moving toward its House test, for example, the Teamsters Union abandoned its staunchly pro-highway stand to endorse the idea. Mobil Oil Corp. has been running advertisements for some time, and a recent advertisement was headlined: "Let's End The Highway Trust Fund." Suggesting that more emphasis should be given transit, several other oil companies also have voiced support for transit. The National Automobile Dealers Association now advocates tapping the trust fund for transit.

Some of the pro-highway forces advocate giving modest ground, presumably to head off attempts at making them give more. The House Public Works Committee advocated a $75 million study of transit needs and how to fund them, for example. The Highway Users Federation for Safety & Mobility, a group of various highway interests, recently proposed that up to $300 million of the trust fund be made available yearly for buses ("That's chicken feed—what's really needed is money to pay for costly rail systems," an administration man asserts).

Even if the proposal to tap the trust fund had passed, federal spending for highways would have been five times that for transit. Nevertheless, highway lobbyists fear that to open the trust fund to any non-highway purpose would lead to opening it to a variety of non-highway purposes.

For example, they fear the fund could eventually come to be used to provide federal operating subsidies to transit systems as well as to Amtrak's passenger-train operations. They argue that transit advocates should create a separate transit trust fund with its own source of revenue. Transit proponents, however, believe it would be hard to establish and maintain a big enough fund to satisfy their needs.

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The trust fund was created in 1956 mainly to finance the interstate highway network, and as that network nears completion, the lobby has begun insisting that the noninterstate road needs are even bigger. Recently-retired Federal Highway Administrator Francis C. Turner has talked about a "junior interstate" program. The House Public Works Committee adds a "priority primary" system in its bill. And the lobbyists themselves now contend that work on the interstate system unfortunately distracted the nation from a lot of other highway construction that also needs to be done.

Highway men continue to insist that the trust fund is sacrosanct, as the result of a contract between highway users and the government to devote user taxes exclusively to building roads. They say road needs are so staggering that the trust fund can't meet them, much less support mass transit, too.

The Safety Issue

Another approach taken by the industry is to call for massive highway building for safety's sake. Recent hearings before the House roads subcommittee produced this:

Rep. John Kluczynski, the Illinois Democrat who chairs the panel: "I understand that from now until 1990 we are going to need $300 billion of federal aid (for highways) . . . not figuring the $280 or $300 billion more (in state spending). That is the situation of the highway fund in this country."

The House Public Works Committee remains a bastion of pro-highway support. In fact, the rural-dominated panel is philosophically so attuned to the highway lobby that it may almost be regarded as an extension of the lobby.

For, as a committee staff man remarks: "We hear from the highway lobby, but we don't need to." And as Chairman Klyczynski explains: "We are all cousins."

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