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Guest Opinion: House bill would improve all Lee County transportation

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A transportation bill pending in the U.S. House of Representatives could bring major changes to Lee County.

Rep. James Oberstar (D-Minn.) and Rep. John Mica (R-Fla.), chair and ranking member respectively of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, released their bipartisan reauthorization bill this week, the first glimpse of what the next transportation act might look like. BikeWalkLee is heartened by its implications for a serious overhaul of our federal transportation program. It calls for many forward-thinking recommendations for building a safe, clean and smart transportation system.

The bill includes an emphasis on sustainable modes of transportation, including transit, walking and biking, aimed at creating livable communities; and an increase in the power of local Metropolitan Planning Organizations - two trends with significant impact on Lee County's transportation future. But there are many ways Lee County could benefit:

- Performance based framework: The bill contains national performance objectives, and requires the Department of Transportation to set performance targets. States and localities must then establish supporting performance targets.

For Lee County, a performance-based system should require local efforts to provide equitable access to transportation, ensure the safety of all users and reduce our carbon footprint, among other goals.

- Complete streets: The bill calls for "comprehensive street design policies and principles," commonly known as complete streets. On June 17, the county Smart Growth Committee adopted a Complete Streets resolution, which it sent to county commissioners for action (scheduled for Aug. 4). The Lee MPO is considering similar resolutions for all county jurisdictions. If approved, these could give us a head start to meet any new federal requirements and compete for grant funding.

- Office of Livability: The bill aims to improve the livability and environmental sustainability of communities. This will change the paradigm of planning, designing and funding road projects to include complete street designs and can provide tools for local efforts on complete streets, smart growth and transit-oriented development.

- Public transportation: New grant programs in the bill could provide some operating-fund relief for LeeTran and make it possible for the county to better compete for light-rail grants.

- Safety: The bill places greater emphasis on safety, doubling investments in those activities and aims at reducing fatalities and injuries of specific users, such as pedestrians and cyclists. This means that

funds should now be available to the county to make roads safer for bicyclists and pedestrians.

- Environment & greenhouse gases: The Fort Myers/Cape Coral metro area's automobile carbon footprint is among the highest in the U.S. At the same time, only 3.8 percent of county residents use alternate transportation to commute to work, compared to the 9.4 percent national average. Of that number, public transit to commute to work is only used by 1.2 percent of Lee residents compared to 4.9 percent nationally.

The Lee MPO will be required to develop emission reduction targets and strategies designed to meet national goals, and performance against those targets will be tracked and have consequences. Reducing driving is a quick and simple means to reduce emissions; thus, the county might focus on increasing its share and support options for people who walk, bike and take public transit.

- Metropolitan Planning Organization reforms: The bill provides increased funding and latitude for the MPOs, which is welcome news for Lee County. Significantly more of the Surface Transportation Program funding (including all of the enhancement funds which support bicycle and pedestrian projects) will be allocated directly to the MPO based on population rather than being controlled by the state.

The bill also requires that MPOs link housing, climate, energy and other national priorities to their transportation plans. Having the Lee MPO develop and track performance targets will make sure county projects and policies are aimed at solving these problems and providing public accountability.

Ultimately, this bill supports county leaders in making the hard choices necessary to create more livable and environmentally sustainable communities. The bill's focus on sustainable transportation and investing in our country's transit infrastructure is cause for optimism.

- Darla Letourneau and Dan Moser serve on the steering committee for BikeWalkLee. You can find more information on the coalition and on this bill online at BikeWalkLee.org.
