

Building Better Highways

Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison on infrastructure funding, the fight against tolling and expanding oil exploration

BY MINDY LONG

SEN. KAY BAILEY HUTCHISON (R-Texas) is among the top leaders on Capitol Hill working on legislation that will determine the future of highway funding, transportation projects and interstate commerce. She shared her top priorities and forecast for 2009 with *Road King*.

Q The country relies on a cohesive transportation network to power the economy and secure Americans' way of life. Which projects will take precedence as you look at the many needs of an aging system?

A One of my top transportation priorities for 2009 will be to reauthorize the highway bill that authorizes federal surface transportation programs for highways, highway safety and transit, and is set to expire in September. This will be difficult because of the tough financial condition of the Highway Trust Fund, which is funded through fuel taxes and pays for transportation projects, and because many feel the current formula is unfair. Every year, many states contribute millions of dollars to other states to build their highway networks. Now that we have a national highway infrastructure in place, we should concentrate on using federal highway dollars to maintain this national system. In doing so, most of the gas taxes should be left to individual states and municipalities to collect and spend more efficiently without having to route the money through the Washington bureaucracy.

Q What will the future hold for highway tolling?

A I cannot support the proposal to toll existing lanes. The federal government and the states built these roads using federal funding with the commit-

ment that they would remain free. Roads should not be used to double tax the highway users that have already paid for them through gas taxes. In 2009, I will continue working with my colleagues to push for a permanent prohibition of tolling existing federal highways when the Senate considers the federal highway authorization bill.

Q The highway trust fund is shrinking. Do you foresee a fuel tax increase to help minimize funding shortfalls?

A For many industries, any increase in the price of fuel will severely affect companies' abilities to operate and remain in business. Increasing the federal gas tax would damage our economy and hinder our ability to transport goods across America. Instead, we should consider non-revenue policies to maintain the solvency of the Highway Trust Fund. One important option is to reduce costs associated with planning and design. Transportation construction in our country is overburdened by unnecessary bureaucracy and red tape. Cutting needless costs and streamlining the design process can help keep the Highway Trust Fund in the black without raising taxes.

Q What needs to be done to bring energy prices down?

A Unfortunately, the United States remains the only oil-producing nation on earth that has placed a significant amount of its reserves out of reach. To its credit, Congress recently allowed the longstanding restrictions on offshore drilling in 85 percent of our territorial waters to lapse. However, some Members of Congress are talking about reinstating those restrictions, which would be a mistake. There are 14 billion barrels of petroleum in the restricted areas of the outer continental shelf.



Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison

Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison was first elected to the Senate in 1993 in a special election. One year later, she was re-elected to a full six-year term. She is the ranking member on the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation. She also serves on the Committee on Appropriations, Committee on Veterans Affairs, and the Committee on Rules and Administration.

Those reserves should be explored and drilled for America's energy needs. Congress shouldn't stop there. We also need to permit energy exploration in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. In 1995 I joined with my Republican colleagues to pass a bill allowing exploration in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Unfortunately, President Clinton vetoed that bill. If he had signed it, today our country would be producing about one million more barrels of oil per day — nearly enough to replace our daily imports from Saudi Arabia. While we can't drill our way to energy independence, increasing our domestic production of oil can be a bridge to the next generation of energy technologies. ☉

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