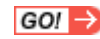


UPDATED: 1:30 p.m. CDT, March 13, 2008

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p.m. CDT
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## Senate, House pass different versions of annual road funding plan

3/12/2008, 8:06 p.m. CDT

By MELINDA DESLATTE

The Associated Press

**BATON ROUGE, La.** (AP) — Road repairs and transportation projects would get a **boosted infusion of state cash each year**, growing to more than \$350 million within seven years, under **bills approved Wednesday by the House and Senate**.

The measures — approved unanimously in each chamber — would **redirect the state sales tax on vehicles to road and bridge construction and port improvements, steering the money away from the general fund** where it pays for regular state expenses.

**The redirection would be phased in over seven years, with \$42 million redirected to transportation in the fiscal year beginning July 1. By full phase-in, in the fiscal year beginning July 1, 2014, an estimated \$350 million-plus more each year would be spent on road repairs and transportation projects.**

Lawmakers said the proposal aims to chip away at a multibillion dollar list of transportation needs and improvements, like road repaving, interstate expansions and port upgrades. They said it would help improve commerce and economic development efforts.

"It will put transportation funding in a better situation where we can build more roads, repair more bridges," said House Speaker Jim Tucker, R-Terrytown.

The backlog of needs is growing, as Louisiana's gasoline tax and other road funding sources stay flat against inflation and construction costs skyrocket after the 2005 hurricanes created a worker shortage.

However, the House and Senate passed differing versions of the funding plan, amid worries about what to do with the money in tough budget times. The Senate-backed bill would allow more leeway to cut into the new transportation money when the state has a deficit than the House-approved bill would provide.

Sen. Joe McPherson worried that still wasn't enough protection for the two budget areas most vulnerable to cutting: health care and higher education. He disagreed with Gov. Bobby Jindal's assertion that the dollars can be shifted to transportation projects without affecting other areas of the budget that normally get those dollars.

"Are you willing to cut vital government services to fund other government

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services? They're trying to portray it as you can have your cake and eat it too, and ladies and gentlemen, that just don't happen," said McPherson, D-Woodworth.

McPherson tried to add language to the bill that would require ongoing state services to be funded before the sales tax dollars could be shifted to transportation, but his amendment failed in a 14-22 vote. McPherson didn't vote on final passage of the bill.

On the Net:

Senate Bill 11 and House Bill 4 can be found at <http://www.legis.state.la.us>

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