

The Senate passed the combined FAA/Highway extension bill by a vote of 92-6 yesterday, and the bill now goes to President Obama's desk for signature.

Sen. Tom Coburn, R-Okla., held up Senate consideration of the measure for several days over the TE portion of the highway bill.

Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., was a key negotiator of the deal which allowed Coburn to drop his objections to the highway bill, and it apparently involves an agreement over how TE will be treated in the new multi-year surface transportation bill she is crafting. We are told that Coburn's concern does not involve the Recreational Trails Program – just the TE (Transportation Enhancements) program which requires states to spend 10 percent of funding from the Surface Transportation Program for “transportation enhancement activities” such as bike paths, walkways and scenic beautification. Several media accounts say that the deal agreed to by Boxer, Coburn, majority Leader Reid and others is that the long term highway authorization bill will carry a state opt-out for TE.

ABC news reported, in part:

“The deal resolved a standoff between Coburn and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., involving items such as bike paths and white squirrels.

“Before the deal, senators were told they might need to be in Washington for a weekend session if the FAA issue was not resolved in time to avoid a partial FAA shutdown after midnight Saturday morning.

“I hope he would reconsider,” Reid said of Coburn holding up the FAA bill over a portion of the highway bill that it is coupled with. “He says that he doesn’t like bike paths being part of the highway bill. Well, for most Americans, they are absolutely important. It’s good for purposes of allowing people to travel without burning all the fossil fuel on the highways.”

“The “transportation enhancement activities” mandate Coburn objected to could help fund things like museums, pedestrian walkways, landscaping and scenic beautification – or, as Coburn pointed out Wednesday, things like a white squirrel observation deck and bike paths.”

This is good news for recreational trails, byways, boating and fishing and public lands roads. The Congressional action continues funding at current levels and makes a multiyear bill at similar levels much more likely early in 2012.