

That's a sharp turn away from the current landscape and, critics say, from any sort of coordinated, national effort on transportation. A broad argument over governing philosophy, however, is buried under practical and sobering financial numbers.

The Congressional Budget Office estimates the Highway Trust Fund balance will turn negative in fiscal 2013, which starts this Oct. 1. The Senate bill spends more than what's in the fund over the two years, which is why it was so essential Finance Commit-

tee Chairman Max Baucus, D-Mont., find other revenue sources.

Baucus's efforts were cut short last week after the senior Republican on the committee, Utah's Orrin Hatch, tried to strip the proposals and replace them with the energy language from the House bill. Baucus prevailed, but the committee approved sources that would yield only \$9.6 billion.

The House bill sticks with what the trust fund can pay, estimating annual expenditures of approximately \$40 billion. But the price for extending trust fund revenue over the next four fiscal years is funding for transit programs — not good news for an urban lawmaker. Transit money was a discrete account within the Highway Trust Fund. Mica's plan would put transit and other transportation programs into an "alternative" transportation fund to be appropriated from general revenue.

"Having the transit funding in question is a concern for us. We need to have some stable transit funding source, however that's identified," Steudle said. Michigan's congressional delegation includes Republican Dave Camp, chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee. Steudle said Camp assured him there would be funding for transit.

The House bill includes no freight strategy, corridors of national significance or other provision aimed at improving the movement of goods, giving freight advocates little to cheer about. The DOT is tasked with drafting a freight transportation plan, and states are obligated to design their own freight plans.

Although it looks like a recipe for a mash-up of transportation policy, Steudle said it's not as bad as it appears. "We have a number of coalitions among Midwest states where we're working on freight movement." Goods that cross the Canadian border into Michigan may be bound for 26 other states or Mexico. The Michigan DOT isn't going to ignore Interstate 69 because it's Indiana's trade corridor.

"From a freight standpoint, there's much more of a need for us to look across state lines," Steudle said. "I think states can do that, but we need the federal government in that conversation as well.

"When Mica encourages the federal government to put together a freight plan, he means that the states are going to have to be involved, as opposed to somebody who sits in Washington and says here's how it's going to go," Steudle said. "When you weigh all the things together, we have to say we're taking the side that says we need to get this done."



FOR WHAT MAY be the first time, the U.S. has a transportation bill that acknowledges some goods move on the surface of the water.

Rep. John Mica, R-Fla., included in his transportation a "placeholder" for the Realize America's Maritime Promise Act, or RAMP Act, which calls for all Harbor Maintenance Tax revenue collected each year to be used for its intended purpose: maintaining harbors and channels.

Although 40 percent of the House supports the measure, it lacked the approval of the House Ways and Means Committee, approval that was needed for inclusion in Mica's legislation. Supporters hoped the RAMP Act sponsor, Rep. Charles Boustany, R-La., could offer the measure as an amendment to the transportation bill.

Boustany launched his HMT campaign after finding the Harbor Maintenance Trust Fund had a surplus of more than \$6 billion, but the Army Corps of Engineers didn't have enough money to maintain the country's waterways. "There's a lot hanging on this," said Barry Holliday, executive director of the Dredging Contractors of America and chairman of a coalition supporting the RAMP Act.

"I'm still very optimistic. We have 171 co-sponsors, so there's a lot of people out there who really believe strongly in this. We have the largest maritime coalition telling people this is important to our economy, and it's important to jobs."

Holliday said Boustany had a letter from the corps saying annual revenue from the Harbor Maintenance Tax, about \$1.5 billion, is enough to adequately maintain all of the country's active navigation infrastructure.

The corps tracked 59 ports that handle the largest tonnage, Holliday said. The results were sobering: The corps found that 33 percent of the time channels were insufficiently dredged to operate at full capacity. The result: Some vessels have to carry lighter loads, or two ships can't pass each other in the channel.

"Clearly, there's been a reduction in service over the four-year period that they've been looking at it," Holliday said. "We're definitely looking at a system of ports that are diminished in their level of service.

"We've been really lucky. If we had a series of hurricanes that raked up the East Coast or Gulf Coast, the money is just not there to respond to those kinds of dredging needs," he said. "It's a lot of risk."

— R.G. Edmonson