

Reno-to-Vegas interstate in highway bill deal

By Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The House and Senate have reached agreement on a five-year, \$281 billion transportation bill that would increase spending to address the nation's aging and congested highways and transit systems, including an extension of the future Interstate 11 connecting Reno and Las Vegas.

The bill would put an end to the cycle of temporary extensions and threatened shutdowns of transportation programs that have bedeviled Congress for the past seven years, making it difficult for states to plan long-term projects.

A draft of the bill boosts highway spending by 14.9 percent and transit spending by 18.1 percent over the life of the bill, said Jeff Davis, an expert on transportation spending with the nonprofit Eno Center for Transportation.

Included in the bill is an extension for the future I-11, which as it currently stands would connect Las Vegas with Phoenix. Nevada's Washington delegation, including Democratic Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid and Republican Sen. Dean Heller, has lobbied for an extension to Reno.

Heller said in a news release the inclusion of the Reno extension was a boon for the the state's economy.

"Today's news that the extension of I-11 was included in the final highway bill is a major win for our state," Heller said. "Connecting Phoenix, Las Vegas, and Northern Nevada will spur long-term economic development, create jobs, and bolster international trade."

But the bill still falls far short of the \$400 billion over

six years that Transportation Secretary Anthony Foxx has said is necessary to keep traffic congestion from worsening, and it puts off the difficult decision of how to pay for transportation programs in a way that's sustainable for the long term. The federal 18.4 cents a gallon gas tax, the main source of Highway Trust Fund revenues, hasn't been increased since 1993 and no longer is enough to cover annual spending on transportation programs.