

# Infrastructure a Priority for House Transport Panel (Corrected)

- Oregon's DeFazio in line to take helm of Transportation panel
- Gas tax increase, cleanup of contaminated federal sites

By Shaun Courtney and David Schultz | November 7, 2018 11:40AM ET

(Corrects location of Jeff Denham's district in third paragraph.)

Rep. [Peter DeFazio](#) (D-Ore.), the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee's ranking member and heir apparent to lead the panel in January, has been clear about his priorities: a "real" infrastructure bill with "real money," and oversight of President Donald Trump's management of General Services Administration property in the Trump Hotel in Washington.

"I have assurances from the current leadership that infrastructure is at the top of their agenda," DeFazio said in an interview during the summer.

The bigger question mark has long-been who will lead Republicans on the committee, given the retirement of Chairman [Bill Shuster](#) (R-Pa.). Rep. [Sam Graves](#) (R-Mo.) breezed through an easy election and has spent the better part of the last year preparing to make the pitch to become chairman. Rep. [Jeff Denham](#) (R-Calif.) also sought the gavel, but the race in his Central Valley district is still too close to call, with Denham holding a lead of less than one percent over his Democratic challenger.

If Denham can eke out a win, it would set up a long-anticipated race for the top Republican committee spot with Graves. Denham has not spent as much time as Graves to push for the chairmanship, given his tight race, but finds a close ally in fellow Californian and would-be leader Rep. [Kevin McCarthy](#) (R-Calif.).]

All three think infrastructure should be the Transportation Committee's top priority in the new Congress. They'll just need to negotiate key policy differences on how to pay for that infrastructure.



Photo - Olivier Douliery/Bloomberg via Getty Images

Rep. Peter DeFazio (D-Ore.) gestures while speaking during a hearing in Washington, D.C., on Wednesday, Oct. 11, 2017.

## Highway Trust Fund

The Highway Trust Fund, which finances most federal government spending for highways and mass transit, faces a funding shortfall after 2020. Congress will need to come up with a solution as part of a new surface transportation authorization bill to replace the 2015 FAST Act ([Public Law 114-94](#)).

“We don’t need much more policy changes. We have pretty good policy in the FAST Act. It’s just inadequate funding,” DeFazio said in an interview.

DeFazio backs increasing the gasoline tax through a plan he calls A Penny for Progress, which would cap an annual gas tax increase at 1.5 cent-per-gallon and which House Freedom Caucus member Rep. [Thomas Massie](#) (R-Ky.) also supports. DeFazio would also like to see Congress create hundreds of billions of dollars in bonds for infrastructure and paying it back.

“No new unpaid for debt,” he said in an interview.

Graves, however, says Congress should move more quickly towards an alternative infrastructure financing tool—vehicle miles traveled (VMT)— rather than patching the gas tax for another few years.

“We’re going to have to turn right back around and spend that political capital to try to replace it because the gas tax is going away. We simply have more and more vehicles on the road that don’t use gas,” Graves said in an interview.

Denham also expressed an interest in VMT among other financing options. Congress needs to work towards “capturing revenue not being captured today,” from electric vehicles, hybrids and others, he said in an interview.

DeFazio, whose home state is part of a vehicle miles traveled pilot project stemming from the FAST Act, says the tool isn’t ready yet, calling it an “artful dodge.”

He plans to work with his colleagues on the Ways and Means Committee to move quickly on infrastructure financing.

“They want to have a select subcommittee that will be holding hearings starting almost immediately on a wide-range of infrastructure issues, everything from Superfund to clean water to transportation, infrastructure, aviation, harbors and all that,” DeFazio said.

## **Water and Environment**

Rep. [Grace Napolitano](#) (D-Calif.) will likely be the new leader of the subcommittee on water resources and the environment. One of her top priorities will be to make sure the Environmental Protection Agency is making progress on cleaning up contaminated federal property, she said in an interview.

“We need to give the EPA more money to do things they’re supposed to do in cleaning up contaminated federal sites,” Napolitano said. “I’ve asked for a report on all federal sites that have languished.”

Napolitano represents a district about 20 miles east of downtown Los Angeles that includes San Jose Creek and Walnut Creek, two tributaries of the San Gabriel River that are littered with hazardous waste sites, according to EPA [maps](#).

The current chairman of the subcommittee, Rep. [Garret Graves](#) (R-La.), will now likely become its ranking member. His top priority would be to continue the process of reorganizing the Army Corps of Engineers out of the Department of Defense, he said in an interview. The Pentagon isn’t the right place for an agency with a backlog of \$100 billion of civilian infrastructure projects, he said.

“These are important projects,” he said. “We have got to get the project delivery mechanism fixed.”

## **Other Subcommittees**

Rep. [Rick Larsen](#) (D-Wash.) will likely keep his aviation subcommittee, moving over to chairman.

“There’s plenty of work to do, not everything that we do is writing legislation, a lot of it is oversight,” he said in an interview. Oversight would include implementation of the Federal Aviation Administration authorization ([Public Law 115-254](#)), implementation for

NextGen air traffic control, and exploring new areas like commercial space and drones, he said.

Del. [Eleanor Holmes Norton](#) (D-D.C.), the second highest ranking committee Democrat, expects to lead the surface transportation committee, she told a gathering of school children during a Walk to School Day celebration in the Capitol Hill neighborhood of Washington. She told the gathering she would work to make cities more walkable.

“If you keep setting the example, we’ll bring home the funds,” she said.

With assistance from Tiffany Stecker