

Rail Transit Left Out of Port Measure

by David Lightman

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WASHINGTON -- As Congress headed for a long pre-election recess last week, Republican leaders refused to add money for rail and transit protection to a major port security bill: It was just too important to be cluttered with extraneous amendments, they said, according to this report by David Lightman published by the Hartford Courant. So backers of the rail and transit money, including Sen. Joseph I. Lieberman, D-Conn., were angry and upset when leaders decided it was OK to insert a limit on Internet gambling in the bill.

For months, Lieberman and other urban lawmakers had pushed hard to include \$400 million for mass transit, notably buses, subways and commuter rail, and another \$400 million for longer-distance passenger rail and freight, including Amtrak. Connecticut could have used the money to beef up security on commuter rail lines around the state.

But White House and congressional leaders were eager for a strong port security measure to pass before the Nov. 7 election and including rail and transit would be a distraction and perhaps hurt the bill's chances.

Yet top GOP officials added the Internet gambling provision, largely at the urging of Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, R-Tenn., as well as Sen. Jon Kyl, R-Ariz., who had been pushing the legislation for 11 years and this fall faces a tough re-election fight. Frist's press office would not publicly discuss the tactics, instead issuing a statement explaining why he wanted the provision so badly: "Gambling is a serious addiction that undermines the family, dashes dreams, and frays the fabric of society," Frist said. Democrats were left frustrated. "History tells us that rail and mass transit in America is a target," said Rep. Bennie G. Thompson, D-Miss., top Democrat on the House Committee on Homeland Security. "The Transportation Security Administration's failure to address this known vulnerability is beyond me."

Lieberman, top Democrat on the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, was on the House-Senate conference committee charged with writing the bill, and was ready to push legislation passed by the Senate last month as part of the port bill providing \$4.6 billion over three years strictly for rail and transit security. The House version of the port bill had nothing for rail or transit, but the negotiations among members of Congress consisted largely of members reading statements, "a sham conference process," Thompson said.

Republicans, who had the majority, did not even bring up the rail and transit funding. House Committee On Homeland Security Chairman Peter King, R-N.Y., explained that House members were asked to consider rail and transit money too late in the negotiating process.

Lieberman and other Democrats could do little but complain. He called the negotiations a "unilateral, partisan process that resulted in an 11th hour insertion" of the Internet gaming bill. And, Lieberman added, "The absence of funding for rail and transit security is a major omission that

leaves wide open an entire transportation sector that we know from history is an appealing target for terrorists."

His committee and others have had hearings on rail and transit vulnerability. In March 2004, train bombings in Madrid killed 191, and 15 months later, London was rocked by subway and bus bombings that killed 54. In July, more than 200 people died when a series of bombings hit commuter trains in India.

Sources close to the situation said there were three key reasons for the Republican leaders' stance. One was a concern that Congress has authorized too much spending already this year, and conservatives were feeling political pressure back home that they were not doing enough to control the federal deficit.

A second problem was that Congress was struggling to finish its work last week so members could go home and campaign. In that atmosphere, attaching anything controversial to legislation could slow it down, and tightening port security was a major Bush administration priority.

A third reason for excluding the transit and rail money is that many members thought ample funds are available for those purposes. Since July, the Department of Homeland Security announced it was distributing more than \$136 million in previously passed transit grants, as well as \$9.5 million for intercity bus security grant programs, and the 2007 homeland security appropriations bill passed by Congress last week adds \$175 million to that sum.

Urban lawmakers and many state and local officials counter that is far from enough. Currently, Connecticut's rail and transit security funding is pooled with New York's and New Jersey's, and is used on the rail and transit lines along the Long Island Sound shoreline that feed into New York City.

If more funding were available, "we'd definitely apply for it," said Wayne D. Sanford, Connecticut deputy commissioner of emergency management and homeland security. Among the possible uses for additional rail and transit money is more security for feeder lines that connect with commuter rail that run from Danbury to Stamford, the Naugatuck Valley to Bridgeport and Hartford to New Haven.

Current grants are used for a variety of purposes, including extra police on trains and other measures. With more money, the agency could add personnel, dogs and surveillance devices. Sanford could not estimate precisely what the eliminated funding will mean to Connecticut's plans, saying, "We're waiting to get a detailed analysis."