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THE CURRENT: Will House Democrats' infrastructure plan yield results?

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(MUSIC)

PITA: You're listening to The Current, part of the Brookings Podcast Network.

While the Senate has been occupied during the last couple of weeks with the impeachment trial of the president, work has continued on in the House. Last week House Democrats put forth a \$760 billion proposal for improving the nation's roads, bridges, transit, broadband internet, and water systems.

With us today to talk about some of the details of this plan and infrastructure priorities overall is Adie Tomer, a fellow in the Metropolitan Policy Program here at Brookings where he leads our infrastructure initiative. Adie, thanks for being here.

TOMER: Thanks for having me, Adrianna

PITA: So Adie, start us off - what's included in this framework? I understand it was put forth as having a strong clean energy and climate resilience focus, as well as all the other things I mentioned at the beginning.

TOMER: Yeah, the House Democrats aimed really big here, and some of that's because they can, and some of that's because they want to. So let me break that down a little. They can aim big because the House has a really interesting, and I would argue, better structure at the committee level. So, Chairman DeFazio, who comes from Oregon, and his committee is called Transportation and Infrastructure, and it's kind of exactly what it sounds like. It has really broad jurisdiction over all those programs that you listed off at the beginning. So that allows him, the ranking member, Graves, on the Republican side, the committee members and staff, it allows them to tackle a whole bunch of different infrastructure sectors, or what more colloquially we'd just call topic areas, all at the same time.

That leads to the second point, which is, the Democrats wanted to aim big here, too. And there's a few reasons for that, before I go into any of the details. Back in 2016, we heard a lot, both from now-President Trump and from Secretary Clinton on the campaign trail, they wanted to promise really big infrastructure programs for the country, effectively both were calling it "Rebuilding America." We've seen really little progress since then – and maybe we'll touch on that – but for the House Democrats, if you think about it, back to the results of that election, until this new Congress that got sworn in in 2019, the Democrats have really been frozen out. They didn't have the presidency, they didn't have the House or the Senate, so they weren't able to put forth their vision. The last one we heard was then-candidate

Secretary Clinton's vision, which doesn't speak for the party. So, this was their opportunity, finally, to say "if we were going to do an infrastructure program, this is what it would look like."

And, it's really big, as you point out, \$760 billion. It covers a whole bunch of really, frankly fascinating and really innovative topic areas. It commits to fixing our highways before building new ones – it's colloquially known as "Fix It First;" a deep, deep commitment to electrification and cleaning up, in particular, the transportation sector, but really from a wholesale perspective; charging infrastructure for personal vehicles; making sure that ports are cleaner; energy efficiency even around buildings, and of course the electrical grid. And a really significant investment in broadband, actually stretching out those networks to underserved communities. Then there's also just beefing up spending: new investments in Amtrak along inner-city corridors; new investments to the tune of \$75 billion in clean drinking and wastewater resources. And then there's more: brownfield cleanup, let's say, right, a passion for more urban members; dredging harbors to improve trade. They really packaged a lot in here. For those who like playing with Legos, there's a lot to like: you can find anything you'd want that they would build.

But that leaves the question, right: where does it go from here? I just want to be clear for listeners, too, if you go out there and look for this bill, you won't actually find text. It's actually like a statement of purpose, like a campaign white paper from a Democrat or a Republican, to be clear. It's a statement of purpose, but it doesn't have exact legislation in it.

PITA: Gotcha. Infrastructure is one of those issue areas that's often promised as being this one area of bipartisan, where there's compromises and agreement that can be found. It's always a priority, it seems to be for everyone from across the range of political spectra, from different local, national, state levels, but then it always seems to fall apart in the details. Maybe you can walk through some more of these process questions for us and talk about why it always seems like this thing that everyone ought to be able to agree on, but then they can't manage to do it somehow.

TOMER: Right, I feel like every time you and I get a chance to sit down or we bump into each other in the halls, it's always the same conversation, right? It's this two-part thing of, people love infrastructure; why aren't we getting more infrastructure? And it's the same process problems all the time. Certainly in this most recent vintage since 2016. Number 1 is that the committee jurisdictions are really different on each side. I talked about on the House side – again, this is kind of in-the-weeds Washington stuff, but it really matters here – but on the Senate side, it's a broader set of committees that have jurisdiction here. To give you an example, what the president mentioned in his State of the Union on Tuesday, is he likes or supports a bill from the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, or EPW. And they've actually passed that – there's actual text out there. It's \$259 billion over five years, but it's for a much smaller set of assets. To put it in perspective, it doesn't even include transit in it. That sits with the Banking Committee. So until all of the four major committees on this one weigh in on the Senate side, it's impossible for the House and the Senate to meet. So right away you've got process problems.

But there's really two other elements that I would argue – the elements that people feel and maybe connect with a little bit easier. Number one is the money. It's really, really expensive. Think about these numbers we're talking about: \$259 billion, \$760 billion. These are the largest public domestic discretionary programs. What do I mean by that? If we're not counting Medicare and Social Security and we're not talking defense, this is the next biggest thing we do. And I mean that as a collective, as people. It's got to come from somewhere, whether it's our personal tax money or

borrowing from the future with bonds or T-bills. It's a lot, and we've got to find the cash resources to pay for it. There's a preference on the Hill, due to history here, that they really want the user fees – that's your gas taxes, the aviation fees – to pay for the bill up front. And we just don't have that money in the system. So it's really hard to get the Democrats and Republicans to agree on where to find the money. Democrats may be a little more willing to borrow from the future. Republicans, in this case, they're either looking for more money in the now, or to scale the programming back to what money we have now.

That leaves the third bit, which is that there's really broad disagreement about what programming they want to see here. So, case in point is the climate crisis, climate insecurity, deliberate resilience, whatever you want to call it. On the Republican side, they're much more comfortable with the term resilience and how do we protect the roads and rails we've already built, and of course the communities where people live. On the left, the Democrats of course, they'll speak more openly about climate change, how we want to bring about a more sustainable environment. But until they have agreement on that, it's really hard to line up the programming and of course the money behind it. But that's just the start of it. Do you want to promote more greenfield, or out in what's currently farmland, do you want highway construction? Do you want to focus on fixing the highways you already have? Not necessarily the exact same ideas on each side. So, there's a lot of programming here, a lot of areas to come on alignment with, enormous need for money, different committees all have to weigh in; it's just a recipe for a lack of progress.

PITA: Right, and one of the regular roadblocks – if you'll excuse the inadvertent pun - that even just basic road-related infrastructure runs into is the drought of the Highway Trust Fund is because that's largely funded by a gas tax hasn't been raised since 1993. Have the Democrats put forth any at least preliminary proposals for funding – these funding questions you've been talking about?

TOMER: It's like Bernie Sanders with health care, right? Why talk about the funding if you don't have to? We haven't heard anything yet. And look, in some ways – I know the numbers are different, but the only thing you can get close to on health care is this \$760 billion, it's so, so big. And they haven't had to introduce text – I know, this is wonky again – but, that's actually not what Chairman DeFazio and the T&I Committee on the House side have jurisdiction over. So, it's Ways & Means, which for all kinds of different programming they have to weigh in – no pun on their title – on how they'll pay for it. So they can kind of kick the can on it a little bit. But look, let's cut to the chase. What they're basically saying by not even putting out text yet, but really innovative ideas, is they're setting up a platform for debate, but they're not necessarily signaling to those watching closely that any of this is going to move in short order. With that level of disagreement or separation between both the House and the Senate, with no clear signals on the money, no one willing to step out on a limb and say "hey, we're going to raise the gas tax on every American and every American business that relies on freight on any level," we're going to kind of be stuck here a little bit. So, something's going to have to break, but frankly, what they could always do is just say, "hey, the laws that are on the books, let's extend the dates out on those." We'll figure out really small patches for the Highway Trust fund – they can always borrow from the general fund if need be, in much smaller amounts, sneak it through in the sense that it won't get a lot of press play, it won't bother anyone, and then we'll all live to fight another day, which in this case, probably means the next Congress starting in 2021.

PITA: Is that what you foresee on this Senate-side reauthorization of the FAST Act, that this is going to be the patchwork to hold over some of these issues?

TOMER: Yeah, we've seen this play out before. The previous major law that was five years, was 2009, it was called SAFETEA-LU, which may be part of the reason why it took so long to fix is because it was such a horrible acronym. They had to extend it for multiple, multiple times, multiple years, and there's nothing stopping them from doing that. So, the FAST Act, which, again, helps anyone who's driving around or on transit, you see a federal symbol, either the Federal Highway logo or Federal Transit Administration, and you're seeing that project happen, that's the law that helps make sure that money get to your state or locality to do those projects. There's nothing stopping them from kicking the can from the authorization that ends this September – that's less than eight months away, which might sound long, but it's not when you're this far --

PITA: No, not in Congress time.

TOMER: No, it's tomorrow! So, they more than likely, even if another presidential administration, a new Congress for sure, even if the parties keep control the same way, it'll be new members, there's nothing stopping them from saying, "let's kick this can down to middle of 2021, later 2021," whatever it might be, and let them figure it out, and what we'll do is spend the time between now and, let's call it January, actually debating the ideas, debating how to pay for it. And that actually could be productive for the country.

PITA: All right, let's see where this goes, and hopefully it goes somewhere good. Adie, thanks for telling us about this.

TOMER: Thanks for having me, Adrianna.

<https://www.politico.com/news/2020/01/28/infrastructure-house-budget-climate-108396>

<https://thehill.com/homenews/state-watch/481545-michigan-governor-highlights-democratic-state-infrastructure-efforts>