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FRONT PAGE

LOSS OF TRUST

In visit to Anniston, transportation secretary Anthony Foxx warns of crisis as Federal Highway Trust Fund approaches depletion



U. S. Transportation Secretary Anthony Foxx toured the NABI Bus Manufacturing facility in Anniston on Wednesday. (Photo by Trent Penny/The Anniston Star)

BY DANIEL GADDY
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In a visit to Anniston Wednesday, U.S. Secretary of Transportation Anthony Foxx said the nation is facing a crisis.

"It's a crisis of not planning for the future," he said to a crowd of workers and executives of NABI Bus LLC.

Foxx said that by September, the Federal Highway Trust Fund — now at around \$8 billion — will be broke.

That would mean states would be without federal dollars needed to maintain their transportation infrastructure — halting road improvements and construction projects and forcing layoffs throughout the country.

Wednesday's event in Anniston was part of an eight-state tour by the secretary, highlighting manufacturers and projects affected by trust fund dollars.

Foxx said about 20 percent of the trust fund goes to transit authorities throughout the country, and much of that money goes to pay for the buses such as the natural-gas powered vehicles produced at NABI's Anniston facility.

Wayne Joseph, executive vice president of operations for NABI's parent company New Flyer, said NABI employs about 3,200 people — 700 at the Anniston facility — and it has around 40,000 buses currently in operation.

In addition to natural-gas powered transit vehicles, NABI also produces hybrid and electric buses.

Standing behind a bus intended for Washington D.C.'s transit authority, Foxx told the Anniston workers that along with the vehicles, they should send a message to the nation's capital that maintaining federal transportation funding means maintaining American jobs.

"You are living, breathing examples of the connection between investment in infrastructure and the economy," he said.

Replenishing the trust fund is part of the Obama administration's four-year, \$302 billion transportation proposal.

White House officials say much of the money could come from the president's plan to cut corporate tax loopholes.

According to a report from the Department of Transportation, Obama's proposal would give the agency \$90.9 billion for the 2015 fiscal year.

Rocky Moretti, director of policy and research for a nonprofit group that studies the nation's transportation infrastructure, said the federal Highway Trust Fund has been propped up by general fund transfers for more than a decade. He said the typical means of supplying the fund — a federal gas tax of 18.4 cents per gallon — can't keep pace with the levels of spending needed to maintain the country's roadways.

Moretti said federal transportation officials suggested to lawmakers that a 50 percent increase to current funding would be necessary to make the needed improvements to America's transportation infrastructure.

Moretti's organization, Washington D.C.-based TRIP, is sponsored by groups such as equipment manufacturers, construction

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companies and labor unions.

Moretti said states such as Arkansas have already held off on construction projects because of funding uncertainty and more states will follow suit as September approaches.

Foxx said the tendency to cling to limited funds will occur with the country's transit authorities too, and that could mean production slowdowns or layoffs for companies like NABI.

Foxx told the NABI workers that they senators and congressmen and make sure they "understand how Anniston, Ala., is being affected by the country's investment in infrastructure."

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