The New Link Between an Oil Pipeline, Personal Privacy and Your Ability to Travel Internationally

April 26, 2012 - It has been less than a week since we published an article on the new highway funding bill moving through Congress. In that last article, we detailed provisions of the bill that would allow the IRS to revoke the passports of people who owe back taxes, and which would require automobile manufacturers to include black box technology in all new vehicles starting in the 2015 model year. That black box technology would essentially have your car monitor every movement you make in it. Now, the House of Representatives is mucking up those government plans by tying the construction of the Keystone Oil pipeline to the bill. If they succeed, then the president has said that he will veto it.

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It is an election year. That means that nothing in Washington is what it appears to be. Adding the pipeline to the highway bill is no exception.

Polling data shows that the Keystone Pipeline - a pipeline that would carry Canadian oil sands to refineries in Texas - is supported by consumers who are tired of high gas prices. But that hasn't stopped the administration from preventing construction on environmental grounds. The pipeline has become a political football. It is opposed by environmentalistsâ€¦ who support the Presidentâ€¦ and it is supported by unionsâ€¦ who also support the President. The solution that the administration came up with to deal with this conundrum was to postpone a decision on the pipeline until after the elections.

But the House of Representatives is having none of that. Several weeks ago, the House threatened to include the pipeline in the highway bill. And very quickly, the President said he would veto the bill if it was included. The veto threat has been repeated several times since.

But House Republicans have not backed down. In fact, they appear to be digging in their heels on the pipeline, and that poses a real problem for both the Senate and the President.

The bill could simply die if the House and Senate can't reach a compromise. But neither chamber of Congress wants to see that happen because it would shut down federal transportation programs nationwide and could but tens of thousands of people out of work. Of the two Congressional chambers, the Senate probably has the most to lose if the bill doesn't pass.

The more likely outcome will be a compromise bill that does include the pipeline. Whether or not the passport and black box provisions will survive the compromise legislation is unknown, but if they do it would leave the final decision squarely on the President's desk. And, if he vetoes the bill as he has said that he would, those provisions would dieâ€¦ for the time beingâ€¦ with the rest of the bill.

There are no guarantees here. The President could very well decide that the political fallout from a veto would be much worse than from flip-flopping on Keystone. And there is always the possibility that the provisions that we are against could be stripped from the final version of the bill, even if Keystone is included. The legislation has a long way to go before it becomes law.

The point of all of this is that there is still hope that both the travel and black box provisions of the highway bill will never see the light of day. And that is an outcome that we would wholeheartedly support.

byJim Malmberg
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