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The Pace For Passage Of Rail Legislation Is Picking Up

In an article by John Boyd in the Journal of Commerce and an article reported by the UTU [United Transportation Union] – one of the largest railroad unions, Chairman Oberstar of the powerful House Transportation & Infrastructure Committee has met with Chairman Rockefeller of the Senate Commerce Committee and are working towards an agreed goal of passing a comprehensive STB Reauthorization and Rail Reform bill in this Congress.

Chairman Oberstar said a pending rail regulatory overhaul should include a major change in Surface Transportation Board procedures to remove a burden from shippers who challenge freight rates. The House leader lays out strategy for passing legislation this year.

Rep. James L. Oberstar, Chairman of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, said a pending rail regulatory overhaul should include a major change in Surface Transportation Board procedures to remove a burden from shippers who challenge freight rates.

Speaking to a National Industrial Transportation League policy forum last Thursday, the Minnesota Democrat said the STB bill should end the practice of requiring shippers to create a virtual railroad in a major rate challenge, to prove railroads are charging excessive rates.

Sen. Jay Rockefeller, D-W.Va., who chairs that committee and is the legislations key sponsor, told rail shippers in April he remains committed to passing the bill this year, and that he and Oberstar were discussing how to do it.

“I’m working with Sen. Rockefeller. We met just recently to fashion a common bill”, Oberstar told the NITL audience.

“Their plan”, Oberstar said, “is the Senate would move first on it, but we’d have an identical bill. They move it; we’ll introduce ours, and won’t need a (House-Senate) conference to iron out any difference because they would have the same language”. Instead, Oberstar said, we’ll send it right to the White House, where it will be signed into law by President Obama.

Rail officials and rail shippers have been separately holding closed talks with Commerce Committee staff to alter some provisions, and it is not clear when or how the measure might move before the full Senate for a vote.

Oberstar ticked off a list of provisions the planned final bill will have, nearly all of which are already in the Senate measure.

But Oberstar said it is absolutely irrational for the Surface Transportation Board to require a petitioner on a rate issue to create a virtual railroad. “If you as a grain shipper, coal shipper, coal consumer are so damn good at running a railroad, you’d run it yourself instead of creating it on paper or in a computer. That’s one of many anomalies here that we need to eliminate. We’re working on doing that. I’m very optimistic about getting this done before the end of this session.”