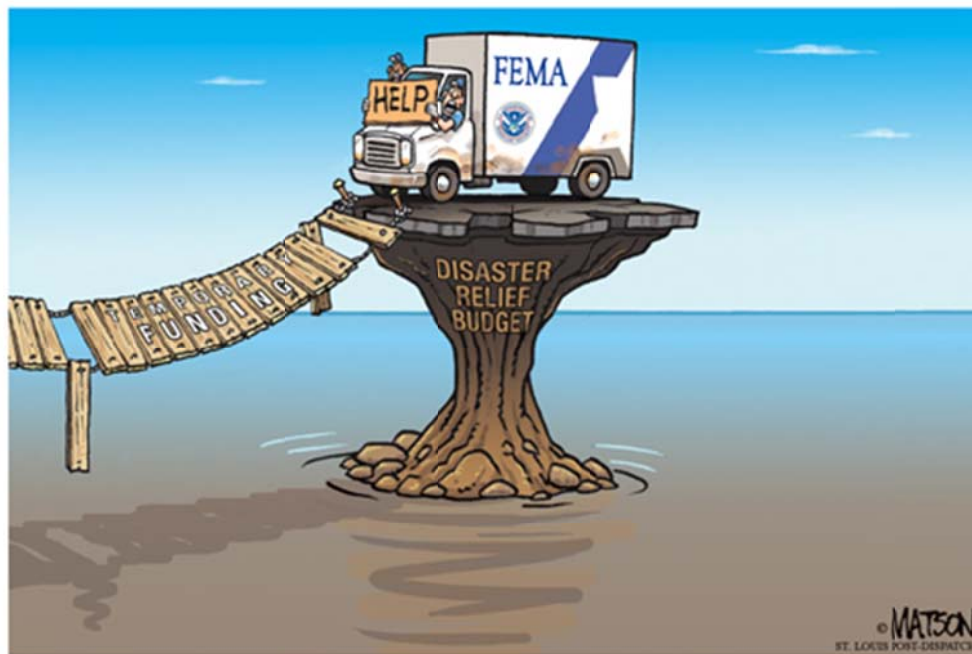


ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

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Editorial: Nation's Infrastructure Investment Shouldn't Ignore River Needs

[By the Editorial Board](#)



"HECKUVA JOB, CONGRESS!"

Congress has adopted the approach to governing that many NFL coaches apply to their craft: It's not really necessary to win the football game, just make sure you don't lose it. Hence, the punt is a winning strategy. This is how our national leaders resolved the impending government shutdown caused by the Federal Emergency Management Administration running out of money.

FEMA found [just enough quarters under the couch cushions](#) to get it through the next couple of days, when the fiscal year ends. Because Congress already agreed to a baseline of funding for FEMA and other federal agencies for next year, the agency can go on operating, even though Republicans and Democrats cannot agree on how much money is needed to help folks from Joplin to Vermont rebuild after devastating tornadoes, hurricanes, floods and fires.

This inability to win, or get anything done, does not inspire confidence in Congress as President Barack Obama hop-scotches around the country trying to whip up support for his [jobs plan](#). A key element to that [\\$447 billion plan](#) is \$50 billion for rebuilding roads, railways and airports, and another \$10 billion to create a fund for other important national infrastructure projects.

One element that doesn't get much attention is a transportation element very important to the St. Louis area: the Mississippi River.

"When you hear the president talk about infrastructure, it's always about planes, trains and automobiles," laments Richard Calhoun, an executive with [Cargill Inc.](#), the giant grain and agribusiness firm. Mr. Calhoun is chairman of the [Waterways Council](#), an industry coalition that advocates for the care and maintenance of the nation's inland water system. More than 100 million tons of grain, coal, fertilizer and other goods are transported on the Mississippi each year, much of it all the way to New Orleans for export overseas.

Many of the locks and dams that make the Mississippi navigable were built, perhaps not so ironically, after the Great Depression, the last time America got serious about spending federal dollars to spur the economy while investing in our nation's future.

In 2007, as part of a larger bill, Congress approved spending about \$2 billion on Mississippi River projects, and another \$1.7 billion on environmental projects to help mitigate the damage to the ecosystem that is inherent in forcing the river into channels it might not want to stay within.

We were skeptical about the project at the time, despite its obvious economic benefits to St. Louis, because it was approved as part of a corrupted congressional earmarking process.

Congress never has fully funded the waterways project, and in allowing money to drip from the faucet year by year, lawmakers only make the projects more expensive. In 1986, the last time Congress adopted a plan to upgrade locks and dams, the projects were funded all at once. The work was completed in an average of six years and within 32 percent of projected cost.

Projects currently underway, however, are taking at least 17 years with 120 percent cost overruns. That is a horrible and wasteful way to do business.

The barge industry already taxes itself to help pay for waterways projects, and, in a [Warren Buffett-esque gesture](#), has proposed increasing its own fuel tax to help move Congress toward funding its projects.

That's a reasonable deal for taxpayers.

In terms of priorities, locks and dams shouldn't be put above other infrastructure needs, not when barge traffic has been stagnant for several years. But work on the Mississippi River would create thousands of construction jobs at a time when they're desperately needed. The projects should be a part of the national conversation.

First and foremost, though, Congress must huddle up and find the \$6.9 billion that FEMA actually needs to help the nation recover from this year's disasters. Then, as it considers Mr. Obama's plan to get Americans back to work, it should make sure that work on the Mississippi doesn't get sold down the river.