

What You Need to Know About the Transportation Lockbox Amendment

Called the Safe Roads Amendment by its supporters, this proposal will be at the top of Illinois voters' ballots. Here's what you need to know.

BY BETTINA CHANG



Illinois voters will decide whether transportation taxes should be placed in a “lockbox” for budgeting purposes. Might sound boring, but it’s pretty important. PHOTO: ANTONIO PEREZ/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

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A constitutional amendment on next week’s ballot isn’t getting nearly as much attention as Trump vs. Clinton, but it could still have significant impact on Illinois’s future.

At the top of the ballot, voters will get to decide whether the Illinois Transportation Taxes and Fees Lockbox Amendment, known by its proponents as the Safe Roads Amendment, should be added to the state constitution. Here’s what you need to know.

What It Says

The amendment stipulates that any taxes and fees collected in relation to the state's transportation systems can be used only to fund programs related to transportation. For example, when you pay a registration fee for your car or buy a parking permit, the state (or city, in the latter case) will be forced to put that money in a "lockbox" and use it only for things like fixing potholes or administering the CTA.

One issue opponents raise is that the wording of the amendment is vague about exactly what would qualify as transportation-related expenses, according to the [Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning](#) (more on this later). Supporters say that more details will be hammered out in the legislature to help implement the new amendment if it is passed.

Who Supports It

The amendment easily passed the General Assembly with bipartisan support. Its main proponent is a group called Citizens to Protect Transportation Funding, a coalition of political groups and construction industry lobbyists. The top three donors to the group are the Fight Back Fund (\$1 million), Excavators Inc. (\$300,000), and Carpentry Advancement Fund (\$250,000), and most of this money has been used to buy TV ads. The amendment also has endorsements from newspapers including the [Dispatch-Argus](#), [Quad-City Times](#), as well as the Chicago-based [Metropolitan Planning Council](#).

How It Came to Be

Supporters say that the lockbox is needed to preserve adequate funds for transportation and infrastructure budgets. They say that over the past 12 years \$6.8 billion has been siphoned from transportation budgets to pay for other bills around the state.

(Opponents dispute this number—they say it's closer to \$520 million, and that most of the \$6 billion was used to pay bonds that went toward funding transportation.)

With the state's continued budget woes, this amendment would guarantee that transportation-related revenue would go straight toward transportation-related expenses and nowhere else. Marc Poulos, a leader of CPTF and head of Operating Engineers Local 150 union, says: "Even with the lockbox we don't have enough money

for transportation. There's a \$43 billion shortfall in the next 10 years. ... Transportation and infrastructure has taken a back seat."

Poulos calls the amendment a step toward "honest budgeting" where, when taxes and fees are advertised as paying for a particular item (like road upkeep), those revenues will remain committed to that item regardless of the finagling that legislators do to balance budgets.

Who Opposes It

No formal lobbying group has emerged to oppose this amendment, but several major policy groups and newspapers have come out against it, including the *Chicago Tribune*, *Crain's Chicago Business*, University of Chicago's Center for Municipal Finance, and Better Government Association. There have been no major fundraising or ad buys in opposition to the amendment.

Why They Oppose It

Few people disagree that transportation and infrastructure spending is important, but it's a matter of priorities. One common critique is that the amendment will protect transportation funding while leaving other essential state programs—education, social services, emergency services, and the like—open to further funding cuts.

The bipartisan Center for Tax and Budget Accountability this week called the amendment "bad policy" due to its inflexible nature. According to Daniel Hertz, an analyst with CTBA who has written for *Chicago* on transportation matters: "We think the budgeting process is a place where we work out what our priorities are, and locking in one issue prevents us from doing that. The bigger picture is that ... our revenues aren't big enough for what we spend. The amendment would not just protect transportation funding, it would take it away from others."

Opponents also say the amendment is vague about what constitutes transportation expenses or revenue, which could lead to unintended consequences. For instance, when you buy a vanity license plate to, say, support firefighters, some of that money goes to the fund for firefighters, a non-transportation expense. Poulos says that would all be hammered out in subsequent legislation, but opponents say the amendment should be more specific so it doesn't result in misuse.

Another worry is that the amendment will protect sweetheart deals to transportation contractors despite the state's budget woes.

The Results

The amendment needs at least 60 percent of voters on this item to vote yes, *or* at least 50 percent of all voters in the election. According to a Paul Simon Public Policy Institute Poll this fall, 80 percent of voters supported the measure. If the amendment is approved, it officially becomes part of the constitution, and Poulos says legislators will then work to implement and clarify any issues that come up that are not directly addressed in the amendment text.