

[By Bob Kinzel](#)

(Host) Congressman Peter Welch says he's cautiously optimistic that Congress will give Vermont federal highway money to repair roads and bridges damaged by Tropical Storm Irene.

But Welch says it won't be easy to persuade Republican House leaders.

VPR's Bob Kinzel reports

(Kinzel) The basic issue is whether or not Congress will lift a \$100 million cap on federal highway emergency funds for states that suffered severe damage to their transportation infrastructure as a result of Tropical Storm Irene.

Legislation eliminating the cap has been passed by the U.S. Senate and it now awaits action in the U.S. House. There's a lot at stake for Vermont. If the cap isn't lifted, the state will have to come up with an additional \$80 million.

This figure is far lower than previous estimates. But Governor Peter Shumlin says it's still a lot of money.

(Shumlin) "This is still a significant problem when you're asking a small state like Vermont to come up with tens of millions of dollars that, as a result of a natural disaster, the precedent in Washington has always been, 'We're here to help.'"

(Kinzel) Congressman Peter Welch has met with GOP leaders in the House about this issue. He says many are sympathetic but are reluctant to boost federal spending at this time:

(Welch) "In one-on-one meetings they get it. I mean these folks, oftentimes, come from districts where they've had experience with a disaster. They know that's beyond the control of any of us. And I feel on an individual level they understand our situation and the legitimacy of Vermont's claim. But there's internal budget politics in the Republican conference that we've just got to wade through."

(Kinzel) Welch has put together a coalition of 50 Democratic and Republican House members from states hit hard by Irene.

He's dubbed this group "The Irene Coalition."

(Welch) "That bipartisan approach, I think, is really the biggest strength that we have in making the case that we've got to put some of these contentious budget issues aside in the name of helping folks who've been hit hard by a disaster."

(Kinzel) Welch agrees that Congress has to find a way to pay increased disaster relief funds. But he says this is not the time to have that budget battle.

(Welch) "So I think maybe there's good faith acknowledgement that at some point, obviously, we have to pay for this like we have to pay for everything else."

(Kinzel) The Transportation budget is part of a larger omnibus spending bill. And now a House-Senate conference committee will negotiate the final details of the legislation. A decision is expected in about two weeks.

For VPR News, I'm Bob Kinzel in Montpelier