

[By Neal Goswami](#)

House and Senate negotiators crafting a final transportation funding bill in Congress have agreed to provisions that will help Vermont pay for road repairs needed after Tropical Storm Irene.

Washed out

Vermont Sen. Patrick Leahy said Monday that funding he sought to replenish the Federal Highway Administration's Emergency Relief Fund will be included in the final bill. Vermont and other states are depending on the \$1.66 billion cash infusion to repair and rebuild roads that were washed out or damaged during the Aug. 28 storm.

The final bill will also include several cost-waiver provisions added by Leahy that will could save Vermont millions of state tax dollars. Among the provisions:

\* Reimbursement for more than the current \$100 million per-state limit on federal emergency highway repair funds

\* Reimbursement of 100 percent for emergency repairs beyond the current limit of 180 days

Vermont officials initially thought road repairs required after the storm and flooding event would cost about \$600 million. The cost has since been significantly downgraded to be between \$175 million and \$250 million.

Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., and Rep. Peter Welch, D-Vt., supported Leahy's provision.

Welch met with House Speaker John Boehner and Majority Leader Eric Cantor, among others, on the Republican side, as well as Democratic leaders, to push for the emergency funding and provisions.

"It sure is reassuring. This is critical for Vermont," Welch said in a telephone interview Monday. "Hard work and personal contact made a difference. This was an uphill battle in the House. It shouldn't have been, but this is a pretty toxic environment here."

"Sitting down personally with the leadership ... just gave me a chance to look them in the eye, show them the photographs and just make the case," Welch added.

Welch said he also called on the more than 50 members of a bipartisan Irene Coalition to help convince majority Republicans that the funding is vital to Vermont and other states. The coalition helped to "create a bulwark to defend our districts against the attacks from the folks who just wanted to cut the budget," he said.

The House is expected to vote on the final bill Thursday. Welch said demands for offsetting cuts in elsewhere in the budget have been cast aside, for now. The funding must be paid for, though, Welch said.

"I'm optimistic about it. You have the Republican conference members signing off on it and a lot of us Democrats are already on board," he said.

The Senate will likely vote on the bill today.

The House had passed three separate transportation bills that were wrapped up into one in the Senate. The House-approved measures did not include the emergency disaster relief, though. The two chambers agreed to include the Senate provisions authored by Leahy in conference committee.

Vermont Democratic Gov. Peter Shumlin praised Vermont's congressional team on Monday for their work on the legislation.

"I cannot overstate how critical this bill is to our state. This is the difference between a financial calamity for Vermonters already facing tough times and our ability to now rebuild Vermont better than Irene found us, which I am bound and determined to accomplish," Shumlin said.

"Vermont's congressional delegation fought hard to secure this aid. I am so grateful to Sens. Patrick Leahy and Bernie Sanders, and Rep. Peter Welch for their work."