

## Politics

# Mixed signals on infrastructure plan emerge from Trump retreat

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By **Josh Dawsey** January 7

President Trump expressed misgivings about his administration's infrastructure plan Friday at Camp David, telling Republican leaders that building projects through public-private partnerships is unlikely to work — and that it may be better for the government to pursue a different path.

Then on Saturday morning, Gary Cohn, the president's chief economic adviser, delivered a detailed proposal on infrastructure and public-private partnerships that seemed to contradict the president. He said the administration hoped \$200 billion in new federal government spending would trigger almost \$1 trillion in private spending and local and state spending, according to people familiar with his comments. Cohn seemed to present the plan as the administration's approach, although the president had suggested such an approach might not work.

The seemingly contradictory statements, made within 24 hours of each other, show the uncertainty of the administration's approach to its top legislative priority in 2018: building roads, bridges and highways. Trump and his White House have been determined to pitch an infrastructure plan in 2018, despite Republican misgivings about the cost, a rapidly rising deficit and a preference to consider other matters first.

White House officials and Hill aides confirmed the president's comments. Another White House official briefed on the comments said that Trump was musing aloud and that the administration still planned to pursue public-private partnerships for infrastructure. This person, though, said Trump had continually expressed skepticism behind the scenes about such a plan.

"He doesn't think they will work," this person said.

Trump and Cohn have had a rocky relationship after the economic adviser criticized the president's comments about white-supremacist riots in Charlottesville, suggesting that there were "many fine people on both sides." Several White House advisers have said recently that the former Goldman Sachs banker may exit. Asked about that Saturday, Trump pulled Cohn up to a news conference stage and asked if he was staying. The economic adviser said yes and that he was having fun.

“Gary, hopefully, will be staying for a long time,” Trump said. “Now, if he leaves, I’m going to say: ‘I’m very happy that he left.’ Okay? All right?”

“I’m happy,” Cohn said.

In a statement Sunday night, deputy White House press secretary Lindsay Walters said: “The President’s infrastructure vision is very clear and is based around 2 main goals: leveraging federal funds as efficiently as possible in order to generate over \$1 trillion in infrastructure investment and expediting the burdensome and lengthy permitting process.”

Republicans are loath to spend \$1 trillion on infrastructure, as the deficit is expected to grow considerably after the tax plan passed in December. Trump did not specifically delineate how he would pay for the projects without the partnerships.

During the campaign, Trump promised a \$1 trillion infrastructure plan that he said would create millions of jobs through a combination of investments from the federal government and private companies. Staff members at the White House have spent months assembling a package of ideas, though his first budget just allocated \$20 billion a year over 10 years for the mostly unspecified projects.

In September, though, Trump began musing to Democrats and others that the public-private partnership idea might not work. He referenced at least once, for example, some projects in Indiana that he believed did not work out the way the private sector had promised. In 2014, then-Gov. Mike Pence arranged a deal with Isolux Corsan, a Spanish construction firm, to extend a stretch of interstate in the southern part of Indiana. The firm had turned in the lowest bid but never completed a project in the United States before, and it fell behind schedule. The state of Indiana had to eventually dissolve the partnership and issued public debt to finish the project, though it still remains incomplete.

Trump’s repeated complaints about the effectiveness of public-private partnerships have infuriated and surprised some administration aides who have worked on the plans for months. They were hoping to propose a package of infrastructure goals later this month, though that timetable remains fluid.

Democrats have often said they would support more infrastructure spending, and many labor unions have also said they would like to work with Trump on these plans. But they have remained wary of how Trump would plan to pay for any of the projects, and those questions appear to remain unresolved.

The weekend, White House and legislative leaders said, was largely marked by bonhomie — even if many key decisions on issues such as immigration, infrastructure and funding the government were not made. Trump had clashed with Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) earlier in his tenure and had been at times critical of House Speaker Paul D. Ryan. (R-Wis.). The intent of the weekend was to build camaraderie, officials said.

Trump vented about former White House strategist Stephen K. Bannon, to the pleasure of McConnell and others, and criticized a tell-all book on his administration from the author Michael Wolff, saying the author barely knew him and had made up large parts of the story.

Wolff spent considerable time in the West Wing and talked to Trump, although others have pointed out factual issues in the book.

There was little talk about repealing and replacing the Affordable Care Act or launching a campaign to curb entitlement spending — issues that are now unlikely to come up legislatively in 2018.

Trump had previously said he wanted to return to health care early in 2018, but he has instead told advisers in recent weeks that he can sell repealing the individual mandate. Top officials have also convinced him that there is no path to repealing the law.

Trump has also decided that pursuing cuts to the country's entitlement spending in 2018 is not a good bid for him, and he purposefully left it out of public comments, advisers said.

White House officials complained that their nominees weren't going through the Senate quickly enough — much of the government is unfilled — and pushed McConnell to do more, people briefed on the summit said. The White House has been criticized for its slow pace of nominating people to key jobs.

Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen briefed legislators on what the administration wanted on border security in exchange for a deal on the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, and there was a consensus that it needed to happen before March, when a deadline set by the White House expires.

Trump told the leaders that they needed to focus on selling their 2017 accomplishments and continued to cast his administration in historic terms, even in private. The president has the lowest poll numbers of a first-year president in decades, and leading Republicans fear privately that the midterm elections could be damaging.

*Damian Paletta contributed to this report.*

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**nez perce** 2 days ago

All 50 States have the right to build roads, bridges and highways. All the States can cooperate and coordinate with their regional states to build roads, bridges and highways.

The federal government should focus on defense of its borders and international interests, while the States focus on building roads, bridges and highways..

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**andy davis** 2 days ago

1. all 50 state are not equal. that's just a fact. if you compare new York to any Midwest state by far. new York will have the best. why? wall street. 2. NY have free colleges for it's residents, free adult day care and special need disable people and children. we have a police dept bigger and better than most middle east and Africa nation's army. and our roads and mass transit is always updated. 3. many mid west states have no internet like Africa. their road are fix by their own citizen and not by their towns. everything is about do it yourself because like all 3rd world nation. you have no choice.

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**terry thompson** 2 days ago

Here's the plan. Give Trump a billion, he'll spend a third on infrastructure upgrades and keep the rest. Why? Cause Republican Jesús says so. That's why.

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**jamonte r cannon** 2 days ago

And OF COURSE Trump's big answer is to focus on 2017 rather than looking to the future. Because why have new ideas when you can repeat how great you think you are ad infinitum?

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**theitlife** 2 days ago

How much economy would \$1.5T bought when the economy was in the sewer and so were jobs in 2008, when the Republican Congress said 'no' to anything Obama and the economy stagnated because; Republicans!

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**poohbah2** 2 days ago

Confusion about what Trump wants? In other words, business as usual.

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**unreal donald trump** 2 days ago

How much infrastructure could \$1.5 TRILLION bought?

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**mark1234** 2 days ago

The problem with "public-private" deals is the private part. Not that private business is bad or anything, but by definition they MUST make a profit. So by definition, the project will cost more than if the government just paid someone to do it for them.

Saying the Feds put up \$200 B to get \$1 T of private money is misleading at best and a lie at worst. Because every single one of those projects will have some kind of ongoing price tag attached. Toll Roads and Bridges, maintenance contracts where the Contractor decides what to do and what to charge, required 'upgrades' that the government pays for but the Contractor chooses, etc. Because if that private company does NOT do this, how can they possibly make a profit? They can't.

Any reasonable infrastructure plan must cover several years, so it should not be too hard to account for it as a yearly cost in the budget. As opposed to saying "Bridge X costs \$3 Billion", you say it costs \$1 Billion in each of three years. Between this kind of honest accounting over time, and staggering projects, it really should not be hard to give an honest approximation of annual costs over time for a long list of needed repairs. It won't be simple or easy, but we have computers and accountants for that stuff. It's possible!

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**silly rabbit trix are for kids** 2 days ago

Yes, so it would cost all the tax payers 1T for the infrastructure...which will be disproportionately attributed to high density areas, cities.

OR, the government could spend 200B of the tax payers dollars. Private will spend 800B...THEN the high density areas will pay for the roads...bringing in income that is then taxed which increases government revenue and decreases the overall burden on the country.

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**mark1234** 2 days ago

 No, you seem to have missed the point.

The government can do the work via one time contract and pay for ongoing maintenance from ongoing taxes. Like they do for interstate highways right now. They manage the process badly, but it has worked for over 50 years now.

The second you put a private party into the mix, they MUST charge more money. That's their profit you see. And these public-private contracts all allow the private party to charge ongoing fees, just more profit for them, forever.

Your point about the urban areas then paying fees that get taxes which you imply means that we'll be paying for the rural roads is just nonsense. Because that is what is ALREADY happening! Most people live in cities today. We pay taxes today. The State and Fed spend those taxes however they want. There is ZERO benefit to be gained by adding a private party to the mix.

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**andy davis** 2 days ago

agree. private contractor are a big chunk of what's wrong with pentagon and their budget. dick Chaney's no bid contracts. Erick prince's black water and the 12 billion wrap in saran wrap handed out in Iraq with no accountability. this is going to be trump's version of Iraq's corruption planning in the making.

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**Robert Lafreniere** 2 days ago

Why would a one horse town in the middle of nowhere want with a 6 lane highway?

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**midwesterner20** 2 days ago

We are the Republikans' piggy bank.

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**silly rabbit trix are for kids** 2 days ago

How? They lowered the taxes.

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**KillinTimeAtWork** 2 days ago

Yeah, if you're already a millionaire.

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**Robert Lafreniere** 2 days ago

Now look who's being stupid!

Like Reply Link Report



**andy davis** 2 days ago

not yet. there is a pay as you go 2010 budget law that demand the new tax law must be balanced or across the board shout down.

this is what is coming at the end of 2018 in congress. the 20 trillion dollar debt on top of 1.5 trillion new tax cut ( 34% of american corporation are own by foreign subsidiaries like Budweiser is own by an south African company, they get the " permanent" tax cuts you get their bill!) add to another 1.5 for the infrastructure. you have a 23 trillion that needs to be balanced. count on military base closing. cuts to social security, medicare and Medicaid. those are the 3 big government programs.

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**dustymills** 3 days ago

The devils in the details, isn't it? Republicans are just now thinking about how they are going to pay for anything relating to infrastructure, but damn it's hard! You see, there is no money. None for infrastructure that is. Now if we're talking about tax cuts for the rich (which is most of Congress) why no problem.....no money means we'll make the serfs pay for it. And just in case you weren't sure, yes that would be us, and our kids, grandkids, etc.

As for road projects . . . Look for some fresh gravel and all new stop signs, that's about all we'll be able to squeeze out of the trump administration. . . lucky us.

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**silly rabbit trix are for kids** 2 days ago

Tax cuts were for everyone...

Like Reply Link Report



**peter kynikos** 3 days ago

When a group of 21st century robber barons get together to talk about infrastructure or anything else, hold on to your wallet. They're not going to do anything for us. It's all about making themselves richer.

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**axlescott** 3 days ago

Whenever a person says to you that they are as innocent as can be in all concerning money, look well after your own money, for they are dead certain to collar it if they can.

— Charles Dickens Bleak House 1852

CHARLES DICKENS, BLEAR HOUSE, 1855

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