

Obama's Transportation pick spans aisle (USA Today)

By Kathy Kiely, USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — President-elect Barack Obama is preparing to add to his Cabinet a Republican with a long history of building bridges across party lines.

Two Democratic sources briefed on the selection said Wednesday that retiring Rep. Ray LaHood, R-Ill., has accepted Obama's offer to become secretary of Transportation. The sources asked not to be identified because they are not authorized to disclose the selection before a formal announcement.

INTERIOR: Obama selects Colorado's Salazar; Vilsack for Agriculture

LaHood would be the second Republican named to Obama's Cabinet, joining Defense Secretary Robert Gates, a holdover from the Bush administration.

The Illinois congressman, who served 10 years as a top aide to House Minority leader Bob Michel before succeeding him in 1994, is well respected on Capitol Hill. "He has a great moral compass," Michel said. "I could always trust Ray's judgment."

A trusted protégé of two top Republican leaders — Michel and former House speaker Denny Hastert — LaHood, 63, nonetheless managed to develop close ties with partisan Democrats, including fellow Illinois Rep. Rahm Emanuel, the incoming White House chief of staff.

"He's a model of bipartisanship," John Feehery, a Republican strategist who worked for Hastert, said of LaHood.

A Catholic schoolteacher before entering politics, LaHood made it his mission to restore civility to Capitol Hill. He spearheaded a series of bipartisan retreats in the late 1990s to mend relationships damaged by the impeachment trial of then-president Bill Clinton. Later, he and Emanuel issued regular invitations to groups of six Republicans and six Democrats to dine together in an effort to bridge the partisan divide.

LaHood, who did not run for re-election, served several terms on the House Transportation Committee before leaving to take a post on the more influential House Appropriations Committee. In that position, he worked with his state's

Democratic senators, Obama and Dick Durbin, to obtain funding for Illinois.

"He is a pragmatist who places politics on the back burner in order to get things done," Rep. Mike Castle, R-Del., said in a statement issued Wednesday night. "Ray will be an asset to the incoming administration."