

Published: Sunday, May 17, 2009 and in 4 other State Daily Newspapers

Raise gas tax now or pay much more later

By Rep. David B. Campbell

Why do we need to increase the gas tax this biennium during a recession? It's a valid question that deserves an answer.

The main reason is that the Legislature, as caretakers of the state's 4,300 miles of roads and 2,100 bridges, has delayed and deferred its responsibilities: two years at a time, for too long. New Hampshire's highway system is its economic lifeblood, supporting commerce, tourism and our everyday lives.

It's been 18 years – since 1991 under then-Gov. Judd Gregg – since we raised the gas tax, which is the primary funding mechanism for New Hampshire's roads and bridges. As a result of this 18-year delay, the state's infrastructure is at or beyond the tipping point. Further delays will cost taxpayers a lot more money in the future and mean costly structural repairs. So we can pay now or pay much more later.

A good analogy is the owner of a house with a roof. The owner/caretaker of this house has minimally patched the roof for the past 18 years and not spent the money to fix it properly. It's never the right time or the right year. The kids need clothes. The car needs repairs. The shingles blow off, but it's still not the right time.

Now, right in the middle of a recession, the roof begins to badly leak. The owner is at the tipping point. The roof must be fully repaired or suffer the consequences of further delay: water-damaged floors mold and rot. Fix it now or face the consequences of far greater damage and far greater cost.

Two excellent examples that our highway system is at the tipping point are:

1. In the last year, two bridges in Lebanon and Walpole over the Connecticut River have been closed for safety reasons. In Lebanon, the temporary bridge alone costs about \$5 million. That's \$5 million of taxpayer money wasted because of delaying proper maintenance. These bridge closings are just the beginning. The roof has started to leak.

2. The state currently can afford to pave only 250 of our 4,300 miles of roads each year. (Except this year, 750 miles will be repaved thanks to one-time federal stimulus money.) Those 250 miles put us on a 17-year repaving cycle, rather than the recommended eight-year cycle. In 17

years, we will be rebuilding, not just repaving roads, which will be much more expensive; just like letting the floors rot in the house with the leaky roof.

Raising the gas tax is the fairest, least painful and most complete solution to fix our bridges and roads:

It is the fairest solution because:

- The 90-year-old gas tax is the ultimate user fee. The more you drive, the more you use the roads and cause wear and tear. Therefore, you use proportionately more or less gasoline.
- Every penny of the proposed gas tax increase goes to the “construction, reconstruction and maintenance” of local and state roads and bridges. There is no diversion for other uses.

It is the least painful solution – not painless, but least painful – because:

- The 15-cent-per-gallon increase is phased-in: a nickel per year over three fiscal years. The increase for diesel users (the trucking industry) is spread out over 10 years.
- Each nickel increase will cost an average driver (10,000 miles per year at 20 miles per gallon) about \$25 more per nickel each year versus increasing tolls, which will cost many residents three times more per year.
- It creates more than 1,100 new jobs and means hundreds of millions of dollars of construction within New Hampshire.

Finally, raising the gas tax is the most complete solution because:

- It eliminates the projected \$1.5 billion Department of Transportation deficit for over 10 years.
- It sends \$15 million annually to cities and towns – in genuine property tax relief – to help fix their roads and bridges.
- It puts New Hampshire back on an eight-year repaving cycle and fully funds the Interstate 93 widening.

The governor’s alternative proposal significantly increases tolls and car registration fees, while eliminating the E-Z Pass discount. Most importantly, it does not fix the problems. It provides only a short-term solution, and the DOT budget, within the decade, will be hundreds of millions in the red.

New Hampshire’s taxpayers and the driving public cannot afford to further delay raising sufficient revenue to properly fix the state’s highway system.

State Rep. David B. Campbell, D-Nashua, is vice chair of the Public Works & Highways Committee