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Editorial

Fixing roads, bridges will mean gas tax hike

The Detroit News

Here's a proposal not likely to win a popularity contest: With gasoline touching the \$4-per-gallon mark, why not tack on another 30 to 50 cents or so to finally answer our responsibility to the national and state infrastructures?

We know -- it's crazy to think either state or federal lawmakers will vote to raise fuel taxes when motorists already threaten revolt over the 40 percent increase in pump prices during the past year.

But that doesn't change the fact that roads and bridges are disintegrating in Michigan and across the nation. The interstate highway system is more than 60 years old, and the nation has never spent the money necessary to properly maintain it.

Because of decades of neglect, keeping up with repairs and building needed new capacity will cost an estimated \$320 billion a year. Currently, the 18-cent federal gasoline tax raises roughly \$85 billion.

The only way to cover the gap between what's needed and what's available is to raise the gasoline tax. Adding another quarter to 40 cents to the 18-cent-per-gallon federal gasoline tax and nine cents to the 36-cent per gallon state tax would raise much of the needed revenue. Of course, it would also help if highway funds were used more efficiently. The public will for paying more taxes is understandably weak, in large part due to boondoggle projects such as the Bridge to Nowhere in Alaska and the Big Dig in Boston.

The National Surface Transportation Policy and Revenue Study Commission just issued a report that urgently recommends more spending on infrastructure. It's a bipartisan group, and it was charged with assessing the need and the revenue required to meet it. Its conclusion, in a nutshell, is that "significant new funding ... will be needed."

The commission's definition of "significant" is \$225 billion a year, raised from a variety of sources, for the next 50 years. Notably, it also suggests "depoliticizing" decisions on project funding, meaning removing them from the realm of congressional earmarks.

Higher gasoline taxes would bear much of the burden for raising the funds, but the commission also urges more toll roads and bridges, "congestion pricing" during peak driving times in urban areas, a freight fee and a rail ticket tax.

None of that is very savory for a public that is already in shock over soaring fuel prices.

But the infrastructure is not going to heal itself. It will keep crumbling unless we do something.


User fees -- such as fuel taxes and tolls -- are the most fair and efficient sources of revenue.

It will be painful for motorists. But so is bouncing along on rutted roads, or worse -- last year's bridge collapse in Minnesota should serve as fair warning to what can happen when repairs are delayed.

Had we addressed this problem 20 years ago, it would be a lot less expensive to fix today. If we wait another 20 years hoping that gasoline prices will decline, we may not be able to afford the repair bill.

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