

### **Users should fund roads through a gas tax, but highway spending needs to be cut back, starting with the Highway 60 mega-bypass**

Objections to the Wisconsin Department of Transportation's preliminary plans for rebuilding a 12-mile stretch of Highway 60 between Grafton and Jackson have focused on the impact on property owners, the countryside and the environment of a highway that would grow from the present 100-foot width to 270 feet and could include bypasses around Five Corners and the Village of Jackson, consuming hundreds of acres of land. Little attention has been paid to the cost of the project, but it is certain that its physical excesses would be matched by financial excesses.

Where will the money for Highway 60 come from? Where will all the money Wisconsin needs to pay for highway construction and maintenance come from? Answers are needed because the state's traditional highway funding sources are falling short.

The idea that highways are self-supporting through user fees, a popular but dubious notion, has been thoroughly debunked in Wisconsin, which has had to dip into its general fund to pay for highways. All taxpayers, regardless of how much they use the highways, are paying for them. Gas taxes and vehicle registration fees don't come close to meeting the highway budget.

They've been thinking about this in Madison, and some trial balloons have been launched, including raising the gas tax and fees for driver's licenses and commercial vehicle registration. The recommendations came from the Transportation Finance and Policy Commission, which also proposed a penny-a-mile fee to be paid by vehicle owners for miles driven in the previous year.

The last idea, often called a VMT tax (for vehicle miles traveled), is getting a lot of attention around the country as a highway-funding option for states and the federal government. Backers talk of GPS chips in vehicles that would record and report miles driven.

The VMT tax would be a pure user fee, which is a plus. But its creepy privacy ramifications—Big Brother tracking your car's movements—make it a hard sell. The version recommended by the Wisconsin commission would avoid that by simply requiring vehicle owners to report how many miles they drove. A vehicle that traveled 10,000 miles would be taxed \$100, assuming the owner honestly reported the mileage.

Raising the gas tax is a better, easier and less costly-to-administer option, but politicians who vote on tax issues are wary of the American hypersensitivity to gas prices. Nothing, it seems, infuriates consumers more than rising gas prices.

## Highway pain at the pump

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That helps explain why the transportation commission offered a pot pourri of highway revenue devices, instead of simply pushing an ample gas tax hike. Wisconsin halted automatic increases in the gas tax in 2005. That, along with the fact that people are driving less and using more fuel-efficient vehicles, accounts for a substantial part of the state's highway funding problem.

But now it's time to bite the bullet and raise the state's 30.9 cent per gallon tax. It's not a perfect user fee, but it's close enough, and it comes with the desirable side effect of encouraging the use of fuel efficient vehicles.

However the money is extracted from them, Wisconsin residents are going to pay more for highways. It's best to pay at the pump.

A gas tax increase is needed, but it should not be a substitute for paring down highway spending. Can that be done? The Highway 60 example suggests it can.

Highway 60 west of Grafton certainly needs an upgrade to handle increasing traffic. But there are many ways to do that short of the DOT's ultrawide highway plan at a savings of many millions of dollars in right-of-way acquisitions and construction.

It's painful enough paying for highways at the pump or elsewhere without the thought that the money is being spent on inflated projects that the affected communities don't want.