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Poll: Americans Diverge on How to Pay for Highways

WASHINGTON — Aug 5, 2014, 2:10 PM ET

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A majority of Americans think the economic benefits of good transportation outweigh the cost to taxpayers, but they can't agree on how to pay for new highways or repairs of old ones, according to a new Associated Press-GfKpoll.

Six in 10 people surveyed said the cost of good highways, railroads and airports is justified by their benefits. Among those who drive places multiple times per week, 62 percent say the benefits outweigh the costs. Among those who drive less than once a week or not at all, 55 percent say the costs are worthwhile.

Yet a majority of Americans bristle at the most commonly proposed ideas from public officials and industry. For example, 58 percent oppose raising federal gasoline taxes to fund transportation projects such as the repair, replacement or expansion of roads and bridges. Only 14 percent support an increase. And by a better than 2-to-1 margin, Americans oppose having private companies pay for the construction of new roads and bridges in exchange for the right to charge tolls. Moving to a usage tax based on how many miles a vehicle drives also draws more opposition than support — 40 percent oppose it, while 20 percent support it.

Support for shifting more responsibility for paying for such projects to state and local government is a tepid 30 percent.

Small wonder then that Congress has kept federal highway and transit programs teetering on the edge of insolvency for years, unable to find a politically acceptable long-term source of funds. The public can't make up its mind on how to pay for them either.

"Congress is actually reflecting what people want," said Joshua Schank, president and CEO of the Eno Center for Transportation, a transportation think tank. "People want to have a federal (transportation) program and they don't want to pay for it."

Last week, Congress cobbled together \$10.8 billion to keep transportation aid flowing to states by changing how employers fund worker pension programs, extending customs user fees and transferring money from a fund to repair leaking underground fuel storage tanks. The money was needed to make up a shortfall between aid promised to states and revenue raised by the federal 18.4 cents-per-gallon gas tax and the 24.4 cents-per-gallon diesel tax, which haven't been increased in more than 20 years.

It's the fifth time in the last six years that Congress has patched a hole in the federal Highway Trust Fund that pays for highway and transit aid. Each time it gets more difficult for lawmakers to find the money without increasing the federal budget deficit. Critics described the pension funding changes used this time as budget gimmicks that would cost the government more in the long run and undermine employee pension programs.

The latest patch cleared Congress about three hours before midnight last Thursday, the day before the Transportation Department said it would begin cutting back aid payments to states. The current fix is only expected to cover the revenue gap through next May, when Congress will be back where it started unless lawmakers act sooner.

The most direct solution would be to raise fuel taxes. That's what three blue-ribbon federal commissions have recommended. But opposition to a gas tax increase cuts across party lines,

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