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Everyone wants change in transportation system, but most don't want to pay for it

By [Ashley Halsey III](#), Published: January 22

With both Maryland and Virginia puzzling over how to come up with billions of dollars for transportation, local transportation planners have found little public support for an alternative to the gasoline tax that could raise a lot of money.

Although neither state nor federal gas taxes are bringing in enough money to pay to restore worn-out roadways, bridges and transit systems, some people would rather see those taxes go up than embrace a new system in which drivers would pay for each mile they travel, according to a report to be issued Wednesday by the National Capital Region Transportation Planning Board.

Overall, the 300 people from the two states and the District who participated in focus groups convened by the planning board said they wanted better transportation and less congestion but showed little will to pay more for them.

The report offers a timely perspective as state and federal officials grapple with massive funding shortfalls, in large part because greater fuel efficiencies have reduced revenue from the gas tax that paid for the interstate highway system and hundreds of thousands of miles of roadway and transit lines.

With Maryland's transportation trust fund headed for [bankruptcy](#) within five years, the current legislative session will consider whether to raise the state's 23-cent-per-gallon gas tax, impose a sales tax on gasoline or do nothing. [Last year](#), Gov. Martin O'Malley (D) unsuccessfully sought a 6 percent sales tax on gasoline. The legislative package he presented to the legislature Friday did not include a renewal of that effort.

In [Virginia](#), Gov. Robert F. McDonnell (R) has proposed replacing the 17.5-cent-per-gallon tax with a sales tax increase. State officials said the purchasing power of the gasoline tax has declined by more than half since it was last increased in 1986.

As they focus on replacing highway and transit systems at the end of their [life spans](#), regional officials also are mindful of forecasts that by 2040, traffic will increase by 25 percent while highway capacity is likely to increase

by just 7 percent.

Every state's transportation crisis is compounded by the prospect of dwindling funding from the federal government, which has poured billions of dollars from the general fund into transportation to bolster the faltering gas-tax-funded [Highway Trust Fund](#).

"The debate in America, when it comes to infrastructure, is how do we pay for it?" U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood said this month at a transportation conference. "We need to be sure we don't become a second-class country when it comes to infrastructure."

With leaders in the new Congress saying they plan to address that before the current two-year transportation bill expires next year, they have several options.

The federal Highway Trust Fund was established in 1956 as a funding source paid for by the people who used the transportation system and one that was protected from poaching by congressional or administration forces who might want to divert it to other purposes.

The federal tax of 18.4 cents per gallon of gas was last raised in 1993, and with its revenue in what's seen as an irreversible decline, Congress has transferred \$34.5 billion from other sources into the trust fund since 2008.

Now, much like state legislatures, Congress could opt to increase the per-gallon tax, perhaps indexing it to inflation to ensure a steady rise in revenue. It also could abandon the gas tax in favor of a carbon tax, which would require oil and electric companies to pay a tax on every ton of carbon pollution linked to their business.

A \$20-per-ton fee has been suggested in some studies, though \$30 per ton is charged in some foreign jurisdictions. That cost would be passed on to consumers in higher gas or electric prices.

Another option is charging drivers for the miles they travel, an approach that could be used by both federal and state officials. That could take several forms: among them, toll roads, tolls on express lanes and computerized monitoring of the distance each vehicle travels.

This concept did not fare well in the opinions of the 300 people that the Transportation Planning Board assembled in five groups — two in Virginia, two in Maryland and one in the District.

Virtually all participants agreed that congestion is a critical regional problem. Most, however, didn't know how transportation needs have been funded for more than half a century.

When several options were presented to increase transportation funding, the most popular was increasing the gas tax. But that won support from only 30 percent of those at the sessions.

Half that many — 15 percent — said they supported replacing the gas tax with a per-mile charge for distance driven. While 28 percent said they might support tolls on new roads, only 15 percent said they were willing to see new tolls on existing roads.

The study pointed out that three of the region's five most expensive recent projects — Virginia's two HOT lane projects and Maryland's Intercounty Connector — were financed based on projected toll revenue.

Although study participants were reluctant to endorse options that would cost them money, the people who

participated in the study were eager to see more money spent. More than three-quarters of them said more should be spent on transit systems, 53 percent wanted more money to go to roadways, and 58 percent backed greater funding for pedestrian and bicycle projects.

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