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Editorial: Texas lawmakers need not fear a fuel tax

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The season's most beautiful outdoor sight isn't the occasional autumn color. It's the gasoline price posted at any station in Texas. The numbers are now south of \$3 a gallon and losing altitude.

That presents an opportunity for state lawmakers looking for ways to raise money for roads and bridges. Even with passage of Proposition 1 on the Nov. 4 ballot, there will be a multibillion-dollar gap every year to meet Texas' roadway needs.

Lawmakers sometimes talk about using "every tool in the toolbox" to build highways, but they really don't mean that. Raising the state's 20-cent-a-gallon motor fuels tax is one place they typically won't go, since that's considered political suicide for the Legislature's majority Republicans.

It doesn't have to be that way. Three years ago, Dallas civic leader and transportation guru Walter Humann floated a concept that looks brilliant now, with average gasoline prices down at the \$2.80 level. His idea was to collect an additional increment in the fuel tax whenever the price fell beneath a preset floor.

For example, for every dime the gasoline price dropped below \$3 a gallon, the state might pick up an extra nickel for the highway fund. That way, motorists could enjoy savings and the state could have more to work with to meet a core obligation. The term for that is "win-win."

This newspaper has long advocated an even bolder step: raising the gasoline tax by a dime. It would be the first increase since 1991. The current tax has lost buying power, and today's more efficient vehicles are using less fuel per mile.

The point is that building new roads and maintaining current ones is expensive, and bold measures are needed to meet the demands of Texas' runaway population growth.

The Legislature's decision last year to put Prop 1 on the ballot was a good step. Passage would raise an estimated \$1.7 billion a year by tapping the spiking tax collections on oil and gas production and using a portion for the highway fund. We hope voters OK this move.

That would still leave an annual funding gap of more than \$3 billion a year for state roadways. House members of a special transportation study committee will be discussing their final recommendations next week. The big-money ideas will be dedicating a portion of the motor-vehicle sales tax to the highway fund and ending the "diversion" of highway-fund money to nonconstruction purposes, like the Department of Public Safety. Both of those moves could mean pushback later from lawmakers who write the overall budget and would have less money at their disposal.

Candidates for state office have been nearly unanimous this campaign season in promising to get serious next year about paying the freight for a world-class highway system. We'll know who's *really* serious by which tools they leave in the toolbox and which ones they won't touch.

By the numbers

\$4 billion: Annual estimated shortfall to grow and maintain highway system

\$1 billion: Additional annual cost to keep up Oil Patch roads

\$1.7 billion: Money that Prop 1 would raise annually

\$1.2 billion: Money that a 10-cent increase in the motor-fuels tax would raise each year

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 Upping the gasoline tax as the gas price goes through a floor I agree is a good idea. In general I would support gasoline taxes as a way to reduce average fuel consumption rather than to encourage people to, wink wink, by a work truck, or be forced, especially if you don't have the money, to buy an eentsy-nintsy car.
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Tony Sanches 9 days ago
 We don't need to raise taxes. Let's just make these liberals volunteer to pay more. You can put your money where your mouth is. There are many links where you can pay. What's that? Oh, you only want other people's money. Got it. Keep spinning it archliberals!!
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 Liberals are willing to pay a higher tax rate. yet, many of us have cut back so much on our driving that we'd still end up paying less.
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 The excise tax on gasoline is voluntary. If you don't use public roads, you don't have to pay it. Look it up moron.
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 Prop 1 is an excuse to defund schools and not raise the gasoline tax, not even to keep up with inflation. Just Vote No.
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