

Batt chides Idaho for not raising gas tax

Ex-governor says roads need funding

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BOISE – Former Idaho Gov. Phil Batt on Thursday urged Idahoans to step up and fund road improvements, saying failure to raise the gas tax for nearly 20 years is destroying the system generations of Idahoans built.

His message came as the Idaho Transportation Department's headquarters was renamed for him. Lawmakers in attendance said he's right, and current Gov. Butch Otter said it's an issue Idaho will be hearing more about soon.

Batt, who served as a senator, Senate leader, transportation board member and lieutenant governor before being elected governor in 1994, pushed through the state's last gas tax increase in 1996, and it hasn't been raised since. That's the main way Idaho funds its roads, and the per-gallon tax not only isn't indexed for inflation, it's seen declines as vehicles have become more efficient.

Batt recalled major upgrades Idaho's roads have seen over the years, including treacherous sections of U.S. Highway 95 in North Idaho. Now, he said, they're safer, more useful highways.

"These projects and others like them throughout the state cost a pile of money, but Idahoans in early days were willing to tax themselves to pay the bill," Batt told the crowd gathered for the building renaming ceremony. "Now, adopting the model of the federal government, we'd rather do nothing or borrow enough money to get by."

Several lawmakers in attendance said they took Batt's message about transportation funding to heart. "I think he's absolutely correct," said Sen. Chuck Winder, R-Boise. House Speaker Scott Bedke, R-Oakley, said, "This generation cannot duck our responsibility to maintain the investment that previous generations have put into our roads, so when the time's right, I'm optimistic that we'll step up."

Batt said the 25-cent-per-gallon gas tax set in 1996, when he was governor, was more than 20 percent of the selling price of gasoline at the time. If that were the case today, Idaho's gas tax would be 76 cents a gallon.

"Butch has tried his best to get some funding," Batt said. "It's the legislators that wouldn't cooperate. There's some talk that they won't do it again this year because it's an election year. I never believed in that philosophy, but I understand it."

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