

Time for straight talk on funding Idaho's highways

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It's time for an honest conversation about Idaho's roads and bridges that includes all Idahoans.

There's renewed discussion about raising \$262 million annually to meet a shortfall identified by the governor's 2010 transportation funding task force. That's not the full amount identified by the group, just the minimum to protect what we have.

But Idahoans and their elected officials may not be on board. There's a hefty price tag to go along with our natural dislike for higher fees and taxes. Idahoans are also understandably dubious about putting a patch on a problem that hasn't been well defined, is difficult to grasp or whose solutions unfairly target some road drivers at the expense of others.

Maybe it's time to frame the issue the same way we would if we were talking about our personal health. A doctor's diagnosis can be unsettling, but when it's personal we weigh the advice, alter unhealthy behaviors and follow strict regimens.

In short, we take our medicine. Homeowners do the same thing, performing regular maintenance and making necessary repairs to protect their investment.

The prognosis for our roads and bridges is not good. We've fallen behind, underinvesting in an asset that's turned into an expensive liability. The user fees once heralded as the fairest way to good roads and bridges are now creating winners and losers.

Idaho's 25-cent gas tax, the single-biggest contributor to the Highway Distribution Account (HDA), hasn't been raised since 1996. Its buying power has eroded as road costs skyrocketed.

We're also driving less — in more fuel-efficient vehicles. More of us are using Idaho roads, but we're depending on 1996 dollars to pay for 21st century needs. Our roads and bridges are aging before their time.

Motorists have a legitimate gripe, too. We're paying \$2.25 a gallon more for gas than in 1996 for an expensive necessity that reaches deep into our wallets. Idaho's other primary funding mechanism, a passenger vehicle registration fee, does not efficiently allocate for wear and tear.

These two passenger taxes and fees account for about 70 cents of every dollar that goes into the HDA. Car owners pay the same annual fee based on a vehicle's age, whether it's 2,000 or 20,000 miles. That's ineffective and unfair.

Farmers and businesses know all about Idaho's patchwork of inconsistent registration fees for farm trucks, seasonal haulers and those that operate within county lines. Truck owners who register at weights above 60,000 pounds have a pretty good idea that the fees they pay don't

account for the actual miles driven. Long haulers based outside Idaho enjoy a distinct per-mile tax advantage compared to Idaho shippers.

Idahoans deserve a funding structure that is transparent, accountable and fair. To accomplish that, everyone needs to pay for what they use. No more, no less.

What do you think? Add your voice to the debate at www.betterroadsforidaho.com.

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