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The national scene

McClure gas tax bill opposition surprising

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When President Ronald Reagan signed the nickel per gallon gas tax hike bill last week, it showed the sharp contrast in the reversed positions of Idaho's two Republican senators, James A. McClure and Steve Symms, on this major legislation.

Symms was one of a dozen senators and congressmen seen in an Associated Press picture applauding Reagan as he signed the measure, while McClure, a member of the Senate leadership, was conspicuously missing.

It's ironic that Symms, a leading financial conservative, is pressing for a tax hike — although a users fee limited to vehicle owners — while McClure is pictured as a captive of the truck lobby and voting against the average Idaho motorist.

Although no one likes any kind of a tax hike, this particular bill favors Idaho and drew the plaudits of Darrell V. Manning, director of the Idaho Department of Transportation, who praised Symms for his efforts.

The measure easily passed the Senate 54-33 so McClure's adverse vote had little effect in the final outcome.

Symms praised the bill, saying Idaho came out very well in contrast with the House version.

McClure said in a press release that the "bottom line is that I don't believe this is the time to add another tax burden on the American people."

His administrative assistant, Tod Neuenschwander, told The Post-Register "it was a close call" on how McClure would vote but he finally decided against it. He added McClure felt the cost was too high for truckers.

Symms' rebuttal carries weight that this is a user fee limited to vehicle owners and not a general tax and that any inequities on truck fees can be corrected later. Symms points out accurately it is better to repair these highways now, or it will cost much more later with more highway deterioration and inflationary cost of material.

It's a rather unusual situation to see Symms argue for and McClure defend himself against progressive legislation. Generally, it's the reverse.

McClure still hasn't satisfactorily explained why he voted against a bill that

also carries \$6.5 million special funding for rebuilding the hazardous Granite Hill section of Highway 26 between Idaho Falls and Swan Valley and failed to support his Idaho colleague who was a cosponsor for the legislation.

The larger truckers now threaten a strike, yet they are the ones who would suffer most from deteriorating highways.

It's also significant that Claude Abel, director of the Idaho Motor Transport Association, which represents the large commercial truckers, sharply attacked the bill.

Abel said incorrectly tax on operators of such heavy trucks would rise from \$1,750 to \$4,000 in two years. Symms refuted this, explaining the user fees is only \$1,600 for two years and increasing by only \$100 increments annually from 1986 to 1989.

National tests have shown heavy trucks cause more damage to highways than 1,000 cars. Truckers have got away for years not paying their fair share and are primarily responsible for the sad state of many of the state highways and Interstates today.

The strongest point for the gas tax hike from the Idaho viewpoint centers on the fact the compromise favored the Senate version leaning towards the rural Western states.

It boosts Idaho's share from the present \$54 million to \$72.7 million in 1983, 77.4 million in 1984, \$82.1 million in 1985 and \$87.1 million in 1986. By contrast, the House bill would have increased Idaho's share only \$1 million this year, \$2 million in 1984, \$4 million in 1984 and \$9 million in 1985. For this reason, the two Idaho congressmen, Larry Craig and George Hansen, voted against the House measure.

It is possible the increased federal amount could preclude a proposal to raise the state tax 2 cents more to prevent Idaho's highways from deteriorating. However, Manning said increased state money is needed to match the federal money.

Symms, touted as one of the leading conservatives in the upper chamber and usually voting against any type of tax hike, said he has always been a strong supporter of highway improvements, even when he was House member.

The McClure backward stance is also the more remarkable because as a Senate Caucus Committee chairman and thus in the leadership he failed to support the president who advocated this major legislation.