

Highway fund failure to hinder motorists

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The announcement by the Department of Transportation that it would phase out some of its restroom facilities is an indication of highway cutbacks to come as result of the Idaho Legislature at both its regular and special session failing to approve increased funding.

The restroom facilities to be terminated are those known as "pit type", largely those where there are no water facilities, and also some recreational dumping grounds. The Department of Transportation officials said there is no extra money available to maintain such facilities.

In East Idaho, this affects the rest stops at the lava beds south of Shelley and the recreational vehicle dump areas at Beeches Corner.

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Most East Idaho legislators supported the increased funding for highways in both the regular and special session. The only ones who voted against increased appropriations were Sen. Israel Merrill, D-Blackfoot, and Reps. Ray E. Infanger, R-Salmon; Wayne E. Tibbitts, R-Lorenzo; and Gary L. Paxman, R-Idaho Falls, in the regular session.

In the special session, the highway funding package was sunk in the House when a proposed truck registration and weight fee bill was defeated. Here again, Infanger and Tibbitts voted against the hike but Paxman did vote in favor. Tibbitts announced he would support a 1 cent state gas tax hike but not 2 cents. After the truck fee hike failed, he got a chance to vote on neither.

East Idaho stands to lose most from this lack of funding because it will now delay completion of the badly-needed freeway north of Idaho Falls. It also means this will come at higher cost because inflation is particularly high on construction material, such as oil and gravel, and labor.

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State Rep. John O. Sessions, R-Driggs, chairman of the House Transportation Committee, bravely shouldered the task of seeking to get the increased highway funding in both the regular and special session and indeed it must have been frustrating at the roadblocks he encountered among his own leadership.

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Sessions carried the highway funding increase package in the regular session. It called for about a \$15 million hike. It was beaten on the first trial but on the second attempt, several

East Idaho legislators changed their votes and it hurdled the House 40-30.

It stumbled in the Senate when North Idaho legislators, particularly Sen. Cy Chase, D-St. Maries, Senate minority leader, opposed the truck fee hike, and this bill was beaten 19-16. As a result the senators did not push the state tax increase on ground car owners should not be asked to pay more when the truckers refused to accept increases — a step they may rue later.

In the special session, Sessions again carried the load for a \$20.4 million increase for both the state gas tax and truck registration and operating fee.

After a salty two-hour debate, the truck fee hike bill was defeated 41-29 — and that sounded the deathknell. As a result, a proposed state gas tax hike bill was not pressed, again on grounds that unless the truckers were given increases, car owners should not be asked to pay more.

It's ironic that the truckers cause more than 95 percent damage to highways, yet resist and fail to pay their share, thanks to a powerful lobby.

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The Department of Transportation and Gov. John V. Evans recommended \$39 million in increase highway funding. This was scaled down to about \$15 million in the regular session and then adjusted to \$20.5 million for the special session to increase the truck registration.

The eight-bill package in the special session generally met approval but was defeated mostly because of leadership reluctance of both parties. It's not a partisan issue because the votes cut almost evenly across party lines.

The package would provide for increased highway funding of \$20,430,000, including a two cent state tax per gallon and diesel fuel increase. It also provides for a 21 percent increase in vehicle registration.

It likely will be introduced again in the 1981 regular session.

The increase would include \$13,270,000 for the Department of Transportation, \$4,570,000 for counties and highway districts and \$1,939,000 for cities.

East Idaho particularly lost heavily by defeat of the highway

funding which, among other things, would have provided some 1,700 constructions job.

Darrell V. Manning, transportation director, and Sessions said five East Idaho projects totaling \$1,730,000 are eliminated and 10 others under the federal aid program totaling \$9,375,000 are deferred for at least six months, perhaps much longer.

In the state, the highway funding increase proposals delays \$47 million in federal aid projects and eliminates \$13 million in the State Safety and Rehabilitation Program, which is highway maintenance and improvements.

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The federal aid projects projects delayed are primarily in the Rexburg area totaling about \$7 million, plus \$300,000 for railroad signals at three crossings in Idaho Falls, \$346,000 for Hamer overpass deck repairs and \$800,000 for improving U.S. 20 north and south of Last Chance.

The highway maintenance and improvement projects junked include \$700,000 on Ashton Main Street, \$80,000 for U.S. 20 west of Idaho Falls, \$300,000 on U.S. 26 east of Idaho Falls, \$400,000 on U.S. 93 south of North Fork and \$250,000 at the junction of I-15B and U.S. 91 in Idaho Falls.

The sad lesson means that instead of paying this year for these needed improvements the state will pay later at a far increased cost.