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Legislative limelights...

Highway income hike saves state from chaos

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The distressing report by U.S. Sen. Steve Symms on the proposed drastic cut in federal highway matching funds points up only too clearly the wisdom of the 1981 Idaho Legislature increasing highway revenue measures.

If this hadn't been done, it would have been almost mandatory in the coming session at a far greater cost to save the state's excellent highway system from ruin. Most states now face the dismal prospects of increasing their state gas tax, license registration and other vehicular revenue to at least maintain their highways, much less than seek improvements.

This is all part of the popular syndrome of cutting big federal government, but what is happening is a shift of the tax load to states, cities and counties. This was much like the 1 percent which merely transferred the burden from the state to local government for more taxes and service fees.

It only proves that the poor taxpayer gets it in the end — only from different bosses.

Sen. Steve Symms, R-Idaho, chairman of the Senate Subcommittee on Transportation, after holding a series of Federal Highway Aid hearings in Boise, Denver, Seattle and Los Angeles earlier in the month, comes up with the gloomy report that the federal government is withdrawing much of its federal matching highway funds and shifting the burden to the state, and to lesser extent, to cities and counties.

In conclusion, he said there will be a need to establish a long-range national transportation system. He observed state governments, many of which are experiencing economic difficulties of their own, must be able to plan for future highway expenses to prevent further deterioration of the existing system. Those are fine words, but just how this is to be done is unanswered.

He disclosed that the Reagan administration proposes to end its funding in the safety categories immediately and the urban and secondary systems after 1982.

Showing graphically how highway costs have climbed, he reported the remaining 5 percent of the Interstate will cost \$52.8 billion, or more than the initial 95 percent now finished since the program began in 1968. Idaho's main unfinished stretches are in the Wallace area of north Idaho and west of Pocatello to Raft River, both costly because of the rugged nature of the terrain.

Symms had other pessimistic highway news: 90 percent of the nation's highway system will require some form of construction over the next 15 years; for the first time in 20 years the Highway Trust Fund disbursements (expenditures) will exceed receipts in 1980 and 1981; and it takes nine years from the initial planning to the start of construction in highway projects.

Symms said there has been a proliferation (increasing in numbers) of small, categorical grant programs targeted at special problems which has drained funds from broad highway categories. He favored, (with justification, if the federal government is going to ask the states to do more with less), states being given more flexibility regarding federal standards and environmental requirements.

He also observed that the federal interest in the urban, secondary and safety categories must be re-examined, meaning, perhaps, that the withdrawal of federal matching funds is too sudden and traumatic.

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Much of the credit for the forward approach in the state highway programs can be given to Rep. John O. Sessions, R-Driggs, the soft-spoken but persistent chairman of the House Transportation Committee.

It was Sessions who almost single-handedly invoked the 2 percent hike in 1976 and again in this year's session against overwhelming odds. He was discouraged at the start of each session because of strong opposition. This year, fortunately, most legislators saw the merits of the disagreeable task and passed three state highway revenue measures that will raise \$17,865,000 a year. In the long run it will save the state millions of dollars and the highways from deterioration.

East Idaho legislators must be given a pat on the back for their support as they generally voted for the revenue increase.

Their reward was immediate as highway contracts totaling more than \$9 million were awarded this summer for furthering the four-lane freeway on stretches north of Idaho Falls, plus other projects in East Idaho.

The measures raised the state gas tax 2 cents, from 9.5 to 11.5 per gallon, and increased vehicle license fees and ton-mile fees each 21 percent. Idaho is not alone in this dilemma, and in fact, is better off than most states.

This year, Utah, Massachusetts and Kentucky also each raised their tax 2 cents to 11.5; Indiana, 2 cents to 10.5; Minnesota 2 cents to 13; Rhode Island, 10 percent of the average whole price; Vermont, 2 cents from 9 to 11; and Washington State set a minimum of 12 cents and a ceiling of 16 cents, compared with the former ceiling 12 cents.

Most other states are following suit, but it comes a year or two later when costs will have risen astronomically.

Idaho still needs more money but the \$7 million earmarked for federal programs has generated some \$40 million or more a year in federal funds. It doesn't take much imagination to realize where Idaho would be now on highways if such legislators as Sessions had not led unpopular but critically needed tax highway movements. The cost, fairly enough, is borne by those who use the highways — the drivers.