

East Idaho solons back gas tax hike

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(EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the fifth in a series of 16 articles giving the views of East Idaho legislators and the leadership on the salient issues shaping up for the upcoming sessions. This is on highway funding.)

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Although virtually all legislators oppose a general fund tax increase unless it is critically necessary, most East Idaho lawmakers are willing to back state gas tax and vehicle registration increase.

They assert that to allow Idaho's fine 5,500-mile highway system to deteriorate would mean repair and improvements at far greater costs later in view of inflation.

Rep. John O. Sessions, R-Driggs, the influential chairman of the House Transportation Committee, who is looked on by his colleagues as the one who has been the primary force for getting highway money and improvements, sounds a dire warning to keep up Idaho highways. It was Sessions who led the move to get a 1 cent state gas tax increase that brought about \$40 million of federal matching funds additionally each year with some \$7 million state funds the past four years.

This has enabled construction of Freeway 20 north of Idaho Falls and for many other needed highway improvements in the state.

"Presently highways in Idaho are deteriorating faster than they can be maintained, mainly because of inadequate funding available to the Idaho Transportation Department," said Sessions. "Lack of adequate funding has developed as a result of inflation and the decline in motor fuels tax revenues resulting from motorists driving more fuel-efficient vehicles and driving them less miles.

"The last increase in revenue to the Idaho Transportation Department by the Legislature was made in 1976. Practically every other state agency is given each year by the Legislature an increase in funding — without hesitation — of from 8 to 12 percent. These in-

creases have been given from the state general fund which since at least 1965 has grown from 10 to 25 percent each year. The revenues have been there so there were no problems.

"The Idaho Transportation Department is funded from the dedicated state highway fund. Since this fund has shown a steady decline since 1977, the only way the additional funds can be provided for the ITD is through a tax increase being imposed by the Legislature on such items as gasoline and other motor fuels, increasing car and truck registration fees, increase ton-mile tax and other permit fees and a few other sources.

"Of course, there is never an ideal time for a tax increase — too many legislators view such increases as almost unthinkable.

"The highway funding problem is not going to go away. At some point in time Idaho Legislators and motorists are going to have to meet the problem headon, and the longer meeting the problem is deferred the more costly the highway maintenance problem will become.

"At the present time, I am working with individuals representing cities, counties, highway districts, state highway officials and industry representatives in developing increased highway funding sources. Shortly after the 46th Legislature session begins there will be some legislation ready for consideration. Improvements of and adequately maintaining a good highway system has always been a top priority with me."

Three leaders, Senate President Pro Tem Reed Budge, R-Soda Springs, Senate Majority Leader James Risch, and House Majority Leader Walter E. Little, R-New Plymouth, said they are flatly against any state gas tax increase.

Two others, however, take a more positive approach. House Speaker Ralph Olmstead, R-Twin Falls, said he would support a state gas tax while House Minority Leader Melvin Hammond, D-Rexburg, agreed something must be done to increase highway funding.

Virtually all East Idaho legislators responding to a Post-Register questionnaire indicated support for a state gas tax hike, pointing out what it has done to upgrade the East Idaho arterial system and hopefully it will bring a wide four-lane highway north of Idaho Falls to the Montana line, besides other improvements. They also said there is need for greater truck law enforcement.

Several of the legislators said that such legislation must make certain that the trucks pay their fair share, pointing out they have escaped increases several years. A number said they would need to study the situation to determine whether the increased funding is vitally needed. They indicate they would support the move if it is definitely determined it is essential.

Sen. Vearl Crystal, R-Rigby, said it may be necessary to reduce trucker rates as those from out-of-state are avoiding Idaho because the ton-truck fee is too high in comparison with neighboring states.

Rep. Martin Trillhaase, R-Idaho Falls, insisted that truckers should pay their fair share.

Rep. Elaine Kearnes, R-Idaho Falls, said she opposed increased registration fees as it hits the Idahoans the most but instead a state gas tax and trucker fee would include those from outside the state.

Sen. William Floyd, R-Idaho Falls, observed, less than 2 percent of the domestic truckers were audited last year, although statute requires greater frequency. Floyd said this is impractical as now applied and suggests instead a charge at the pumps and the ports of entry.

Sen. J. Marsden Williams, R-Idaho Falls, said he also opposes a registration fee increase and favors a ton mile tax collection. He also suggests a gas tax percentage that would fluctuate with the gas price, the higher the gas price, then the tax would be correspondingly higher.

Rep. Kurt L. Johnson, R-Idaho Falls, said it will be necessary to control skyrocketing costs before a solution to highway funding is attained.