

Legislative limelights . . .

Gas tax rise proposal faces rigorous fight

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BOISE — Idaho legislators fear voting for any tax increase during the current session, but privately they agree that proposed raises in the state gasoline tax and truck fees are justified.

Courageously sponsoring such a legislative package is Rep. John O. Sessions, R-Driggs, the embattled chairman of the House Transportation Committee, who knows what he is doing isn't exactly the most popular stance to take during these times of a political year and the 1 Percent Tax Initiative stringencies.

Yet, Sessions knows that such a proposal must be faced if Idaho is to improve or even keep pace with its fine state highway system, gas shortage or not.

With declining gas tax revenue as result of more economy cars and reduced usage of gasoline, he knows that the state highway system must be prevented from deteriorating. It's simply a case of having motorists pay now or pay considerably more later.

It was Sessions, who a few years ago, fought an uphill battle to get a one cent state gas tax increase. It passed both the House and Senate by narrow margins after a tough prolonged fight. That tax, which hardly anyone notices now because of the wildly escalating gasoline prices, has raised \$5 million in state revenue and some \$35 million more in federal highway matching funds each year.

If it weren't for that tax,

much of the present highway construction in the Upper Snake River Valley, mainly building a wide highway north of Idaho Falls, likely would not have been possible. Yet, some East Idaho legislators were so short sighted that they voted against this tax for philosophical reasons, and they might do the same again. It also financed considerable city street and county road work.

But inflation which has dealt particularly harsh blows to highway construction costs, such as concrete and labor, are now eroding the state highway revenue. It means that any improvements and maintenance delayed now will cost considerably more in the future.

A story on Sessions' proposed state gas tax and truck fee increase highway legislative package appears elsewhere on this page.

The one cent gas tax truck fee increases would bring \$16,589,000 more, while the preferred two cent gas tax hike would raise \$24,784,000 more.

This legislative package is much more palatable than others as it places increase for trucks which is long overdue.

The truckers have been ably defended by a powerful truck lobby that has resisted increases while only the newspapers and a few unselfish interests have fought for the rights of the ordinary driver.

It's to Sessions' credit that he has not succumbed to pressures of the truck lobbyists and proposes a sizeable increase. His package of two bills, for

example, shows the truckers must bear a sizeable share of the increase.

Under the 1 percent package, the trucks would need to pay about \$10 million of the \$16 million increase and under the 2 percent, it would total about \$15 million of the \$24 million. However, it would be reasonable to assume they would pass this added cost to their customers.

Sessions noted that the ton-mile-tax rate schedule has not been changed since 1957, or 23 years. Yet it's the trucks, many of them overloaded, and not the cars, which cause nearly all the wear and tear of highways.

Idaho's state tax now of 9.5 percent is about average in the nation. A number of other states also are contemplating increase. If Idaho raised to 11.5 cents it would be surpassed only by Washington with 12 cents. However, most other states have far higher license plate and registration fees.

The Department of Transportation and Gov. John V. Evans recommended a \$39 million increase. This would require raising the state gas tax 3.5 cents, or to 13 cents and tripling the registration fees. Sessions said there is no sentiment for such a hike and he would feel fortunate if his proposed raise is approved.

Sessions said his bill likely will be submitted for committee consideration next week.