

The 1980 Idaho Legislature . . .

Most favor but hedge on highway fund hike

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(Editor's note: This is the ninth in a series of 16 articles giving the views of East Idaho legislators on the salient issues shaping up for the coming session).

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Virtually all East Idaho legislators agreed there is need to continue to improve state highways but they are reluctant to say what type of increase they would favor, such as gas tax or vehicle registration.

Generally, they feel a need for the public to support them for any increase. A number mentioned gasohol as a possible revenue raiser.

Rep. John O. Sessions, R-Driggs, the influential chairman of the House Transportation Committee, feels there is an urgent need for fund increases but he wants a public reaction.

He said "Presently we have in Idaho an excellent highway construction and maintenance program. Badly needed new highways, such as Highway 20 from Idaho Falls north to Ashton, Highway 26 through Swan Valley and many other critical roads throughout the state are now either under construction or in the final planning stages. Our existing 5,500 mile highway system is now generally being very well maintained, however the present level of construction and maintenance will not be able to be continued under the present funding structure.

"Inflation is eroding highway funds 20 percent or more per year, particularly in the areas of asphalt, concrete, steel and contract labor.

"State gasoline tax revenues are diminishing as motorists convert to smaller cars which are more fuel efficient and Idaho motorists as well as tourists drive less and buy less gallons of gas.

"The state's highway system is no different than one's automobile or tractor — they all need periodic maintenance. If we neglect small repairs or maintenance today, pretty soon those small items become major, and much more costly, more costly.



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House chairmen

BOISE — Rep. John O. Sessions, R-Driggs, chairman of the House Transportation Committee at right, is seen with Rep. Steve Antone, R-Rupert, chairman of the House Revenue and Taxation Committee. Sessions, like most East Idaho legislators, feels there is need for increased state highway funding to continue improvements and maintenance, but wants public support to make this possible.

"Whether or not the legislators and the public in general will support increases in funding at this time for highways remains to be seen. Either next year or at some time in the not too distant future additional funds will have to be provided if the present level of construction and maintenance programs are to be maintained. The alternatives will be cutbacks in construction programs and deterioration of highway conditions.

"If increases are made they should be broader than just gasoline taxes and registration fees. Any increases should also come from not only gasoline but diesel fuels, special fuels, 96 hour permit fees, ton-mile tax, etc.

"Whether or not I support increased funding for highways will depend upon public reaction. The problem is there and developing, however this may not be the year the Legislature will want to resolve it."

Some increase

The ranking minority member of the Senate Transportation Committee, Sen. Richard A. Egbert, D-Tetonia, said there is a need to provide for additional funding as the state can't afford to let the highway system to deteriorate. He said there is no chance for a \$39 million increase asked by the Department of Transportation but there should be some hike.

Another member of the House Transportation Committee, Rep. Wendell Miller, D-Idaho Falls, said he found that people would rather forego highway improvements, rather than have rates increase.

"Before I can support any of the proposed increases for highway funding, my constituents are going to have to show me that they favor them," he said.

Sen. Dane Watkins, R-Idaho Falls, who has prefiled bills for granting 4 cents per gallon tax refund added "gasohol is the coming fuel."

A similar pat on the back for gasohol production that could help with highway revenues were given by Reps. Darwin Young, R-Blackfoot; Wayne E. Tibbitts, R-Lorenzo; Linden B. Bateman, R-Iona; Gary L. Paxman, R-Idaho Falls; Kurt L. Johnson, R-Idaho Falls; and Sen. Israel Merrill, D-Blackfoot.

Johnson said he believed the gas tax hike is the fairest, and perhaps some increase in vehicle registration, but not triple as the transportation department suggested.

Against refund

Merrill said he doesn't like the vehicle registration idea and he feels the gasohol refund would defeat or compound the revenue problem.

Rep. Doyle C. Miner, R-St. Anthony, expressed the feeling of the vast majority he would go for some increase of perhaps about \$10 million, but not the \$39 million requested by the transportation department.

Sen. J. Marsden Williams, R-Idaho Falls, said he favors the tax on gasoline be based on

percentage of cost, not the per gallon.

Rep. Melvin Hammond, D-Rexburg, said he would be more inclined to favor a gasoline tax increase, rather than vehicle registration.

Sen. Vearl C. Crystal, R-Rigby, said he would favor some increase in gasoline funding but not the \$39 million, adding he believes the state highway division should be more selective in its projects.

For example, he said, the demolition of the old bridge across the Snake River at Lorenzo and building a new one was unnecessary at this time.

He contended the old bridge was structurally sound and would have lasted several more years.

"How many other unnecessary projects like this are there around the state?" he asked. "I think we should keep our present highways and structures in good repair.

"I would favor some tax exemption for encouraging the production of gasohol but not property tax exemption. There are too many exemptions from property tax now. That is part of the problem, and the reason we have the 1 Percent Initiative."