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KEDZIE PROPOSES PROTECTING TRANSPORTATION FUND

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Paul Snyder

The state Senate approved ending automatic annual increases in the state's gas tax Tuesday, but not without making some provisions first.

In addition to providing a "lockbox" amendment in the legislation to keep lawmakers from raiding the transportation fund, senators turned up efforts to keep the fund segregated, heeding the advice of the numerous opponents of the legislation. Those against indexing warned that without a viable alternative revenue source, the transportation fund would be critically shorthanded for maintenance projects and new road projects.

To that end, Sen. Neal Kedzie, R-Elkhorn, released a statement Tuesday announcing his intention to amend the state Constitution to protect the state's transportation fund from any raids to fund nontransportation programs. Gov. Jim Doyle's decision to move \$427 million from the fund for outside programs in the 2005-07 state budget drew heavy criticism from the transportation industry over the summer.

"During Gov. Doyle's tenure, he has turned the segregated transportation fund into an administration slush fund, and if we don't act now to protect it, road and highway projects could be in jeopardy," Kedzie said in the statement. "Wisconsin motorists have a right to know their vehicle registration fees and tax dollars are being used appropriately."

Kedzie's statement also pointed to Doyle's movement of \$675 million from the transportation fund in the state's previous biennium budget and said the time has come to restore integrity in the state budget system.

"When people pay vehicle registration fees and gasoline tax, they rightfully expect those funds to build and maintain our roads and highways -- it is the essence of a user-based fee," he said. "However, Gov. Doyle has perfected the art of robbing Peter to pay Paul. In less than one full term in office, the Doyle administration has pilfered over \$1.1 billion from the state's transportation coffers."

Not a new idea

Wisconsin Transportation Development Association Executive Director Bob Cook said the transportation industry would welcome the amendment as a means of securing user

fees but that it should neither be viewed as an end-all to raiding the fund nor as a novel idea.

“The transportation industry appreciates the gesture, but I would say he should first talk to Sen. [Roger] Breske,” he said.

Breske, D-Eland, proposed a similar amendment to segregate the transportation fund in March, and though it was voted out of committee, it is still waiting to be introduced in the Senate. Breske’s office did not confirm whether he and Kedzie would collaborate on the legislation.

Cook added that it will take work beyond an amendment to keep the transportation fund locked.

“I’ve talked to my counterparts in other states that have adopted similar amendments, and they’ve said that securing funds is useful as a means of limiting raids,” he said. “But it’s not a panacea. There are ways that those funds can be circumvented, and you’ll still have to stand up and vote to keep it segregated.”

Cook also said legislators will have to stand by the lockbox provision in the gas tax indexing bill.

“The fund is only secure if legislators are willing to stand up for it,” he said. “The governor can still use his line-item veto to get at that fund, and legislators will have to point to that statute to call him on it. Unless they’re willing to fight for it, the new language really means nothing.”