



## **LAWMAKERS ABUSE GAS TAX**

### **EDITORIAL**

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For every gallon of gas bought in Wisconsin, nearly 30 cents is a tax that goes in the state's Transportation Fund. That fund pays for road construction, maintenance and repairs, among other transportation-related expenses.

Beginning with the 2003-2005 budget, however, a portion of the money that motorists would expect to see used for building and maintaining roads has been diverted to schools. The state then has borrowed money to partially replenish the Transportation Fund. In the 2003-2005 budget, the state took \$675.3 million of the \$2.7 billion raised through the gas tax and license fees, which make up about 94 percent of the Transportation Fund. The state borrowed money to replace \$565.5 million, but nearly \$110 million was permanently diverted.

That practice continues in the 2005-2007 budget. The state diverted \$427 million of the \$2.9 billion expected to be raised through the gas tax and license fees. It will borrow \$250 million, but \$177 million intended for roads and highways will be permanently used for other purposes.

As a segregated fund, the transportation money is not part of the state's general fund. However, because the state can borrow money for transportation projects, like roads and bridges, and cannot borrow to beef up the general fund, road-tax money was taken to help pay for schools. The state continues to borrow and pay interest on money that replaces diverted gas-tax revenue.

There is nothing illegal about the practice. The Legislature can approve such budget maneuvering.

But the process lacks integrity when the state collects money for one purpose and uses it for something else.

State gas taxes put the burden of funding road construction and maintenance on the very motorists who use the roads. A person buys a gallon of gas with every expectation that taxes will fund road projects.

The state needs a stable and protected transportation revenue source. Taxes raised for roads should be spent on roads and not put into a cookie jar for the governor and Legislature to raid when their chronically out-of-balance budgets need a convenient infusion of cash.