

STATE DRIVERS MUST DIG DEEPER: INCREASE IN FEES WILL FUND TRANSPORTATION PROJECTS

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MADISON -- Driving a vehicle just got a lot more expensive.

Registering a car will now cost \$20 more, titling it will cost \$24.50 more and getting or renewing a driver's license will cost \$10 more. The new fees kicked in Tuesday under provisions in the state budget passed in October.

Together, the increases will generate \$217.3 million over the next 18 months, most of which will be used for road work. Another \$56.9 million will be raised from a 30% boost in registration fees for heavy trucks.

The state Department of Transportation will spend more than \$2.5 billion, including federal aid, this fiscal year.

Lawmakers were nearly four months late in passing the state budget because of partisan differences, but Republicans and Democrats agreed from the outset to hefty transportation increases. They argued that the fees were needed because road projects are essential to the state's economy.

"To fund the transportation system, we're going to need that additional cash plus more down the road," said Senate Majority Leader Russ Decker (D-Weston). "The cost of maintaining highways and building new highways continues to go up because, mainly, the cost of gasoline prices and oil that's used in asphalt continues to go up very fast."

The higher fees came with some dissent, however.

"I don't think these fee increases would be necessary if we would just use transportation funds for transportation projects, stop building outstate projects of questionable necessity and not spend so much on underutilized mass transit," said state Sen. Glenn Grothman (R-West Bend), who voted against the budget.

Over the past four years, Democratic Gov. Jim Doyle and lawmakers diverted more than \$1 billion from the transportation fund to pay for schools. But the newly approved budget does not include such transfers.

Wisconsin's gas tax of 32.9 cents a gallon is one of the highest in the nation, but its registration fees -- even with the new increases -- are low compared with those of other states.

"While nobody wants to pay more, we're still the cheapest . . . of any of our neighboring states," said Craig Thompson, executive director of the Transportation Development Association, an industry trade group.

Lawmakers opted for new fees over an increase in the state gas tax, which has been politically sensitive in recent years. For 20 years, the gas tax automatically increased every spring, but legislators agreed to end those inflationary increases in April 2006.

Decker said in future budgets he would like to revisit the automatic gas tax increases. "Out-of-staters that come here and fill up their gas tanks aren't leaving any more money behind," Decker said. "And fees are all on the backs of those of us who live here."

The fee increases break down like this:

--The annual vehicle registration fee rose 36%, from \$55 to \$75.

Fees for light trucks are also rising -- from \$48.50 to \$75 for trucks that weigh up to 4,500 pounds; from \$61.50 to \$84 for trucks that weigh up to 6,000 pounds; and from \$77.50 to \$106 for trucks that weigh up to 8,000 pounds.

Under a quirk of the old formula, it was cheaper to register a 4,500-pound truck than a car. The new fees make cars the cheapest vehicles to register.

--The cost of getting a title for a vehicle increased 54%, from \$45 to \$69.50. Drivers must pay for titles when they buy a new or used vehicle.

--The cost for all driver's licenses and state identification jumped \$10. The cost of a three-year license went up 56%, to \$28, and the cost of an eight-year renewal will jump 42%, to \$34.

The new driver's license fees will generate \$20.7 million through mid-2009 that will be used to pay to comply with the federal Real ID law. In the coming years, states are required to issue tamper-proof IDs and perform extensive record checks to ensure drivers are who they say they are. Motor vehicle officials across the country have questioned whether they can meet the terms of the far-reaching anti-terrorism law.

--Fees for semis and other heavy trucks rose 30%. The heaviest trucks will now pay \$2,560 a year, up from \$1,969.50.

Most semi drivers register their trucks in December, so they won't face the new fee for a year.