

# The Daily Telegram

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## **OPINION: New revenue critical to state's future transportation needs**

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Three dollar a gallon gas is back and prices keep going up. We feel the financial pinch not only at the pump but also on our families and businesses. These escalating prices affect our disposable income as individuals as we buy groceries and consumer goods and impacts businesses' bottom line as they transport goods to market and invest in construction materials.

A year ago, we were experiencing similar high gas prices, and state elected officials promised "relief to families" as they repealed Wisconsin's indexing of the gasoline tax — the automatic annual increase tied to the consumer price index. So on Memorial Day Weekend 2007, gas prices hovered near \$3.30 a gallon. Where's the relief?

The money the state collects from the gas tax is the primary funding source for our transportation system — not just roads. In our global economy, the Lake Superior Port is an invaluable gateway to international markets. The rail system that moves taconite, coal, spring wheat and other materials to the ports is an integral part of this region's economy.

The dollars we spend on our transportation system result in reduced congestion, reduced shipping costs, reduced fuel consumption and increased competitiveness. Wisconsin's personal income increases as a result of improvements to our transportation network.

We have nearly frozen our investment in the most critical area of our economy, and what do we have to show for it? Lower gas prices?

Gov. Jim Doyle has proposed revenue-generating initiatives that will help raise more than \$450 million in his state budget for transportation that, if enacted, would again move Wisconsin forward. The Republican leadership has vowed to ensure that transportation dollars raised are spent specifically on transportation. Both sides are correct. Hopefully, we can come together and develop a sound long-range investment strategy that preserves our critical transportation system and strengthens the Wisconsin economy.

Our neighbors in Minnesota are now coming to grips with the compounded costs of "catching-up" after a decade of limited investment in their system. Last November, Minnesota voters approved a constitutional amendment to phase in the dedication of motor-vehicle sales tax to highways and transit resulting in an additional \$300 million a

year after 2011. In the current session, the legislature has passed increases in the sales tax on gas, the gas tax, vehicle registration fees and car rental fees. While the governor vetoed the proposed \$5 billion increase in spending, the battle goes on.

Wisconsin needs to continue investing in its transportation system. Elected officials should support revenue-generating initiatives that ultimately help our families, our businesses and our communities. We may not be able to affect the price of gas, but we can focus on the attainable — investing in a transportation system that helps us all.

Craig Thompson is executive director of the Transportation Development Association, a Wisconsin nonprofit organization that represents transportation interests.