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Thompson: We don't need a gas tax holiday

By Craig Thompson
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The allure of the highest office in the land can make candidates say the darndest things.

Case in point: U.S. Sen. John McCain built his career as a deficit hawk -- even though it was sometimes a lonely position. Now, as a presidential candidate, Sen. McCain recently proposed giving consumers a gas tax "holiday" for the summer.

While this has obvious political appeal as gas prices continue their march toward \$4 per gallon, it runs counter to common sense in light of a several-billion-dollar transportation fund deficit coupled with an infrastructure crisis that is looming in America.

This looming crisis is certainly not a state secret:

California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, Pennsylvania Gov. Ed Rendell and New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg -- a Republican, a Democrat and an Independent -- have formed a not-for-profit organization called "Building America's Future" designed to rally support for a renewed commitment to funding America's infrastructure needs.

Announcing the coalition, Gov. Schwarzenegger said, "America needs \$1.6 trillion worth of infrastructure over the next five years, yet federal investment has been cut in half as a percent of gross domestic product since 1987. This is disastrous because without adequate infrastructure to quickly and safely move goods and people, our economy and our traffic will stop dead in its tracks. "

Then there's this: A transportation report commissioned by Congress recently concluded that we have neglected our transportation needs so badly that we must increase the federal gas tax between 25-40 cents over the next five years and then index it to inflation just to get our transportation system back into a state of good repair.

Members of the bipartisan commission included Wisconsin Department of Transportation Secretary Frank Busalacchi and Paul Weyrich, founder of the Heritage Foundation, along with CEOs of U.S. Express, Office Depot, and other major companies.

Any way you look at it, candidate McCain's proposal just doesn't add up. In fact, the average driver could expect to save roughly \$28 as a result of this proposal. That would be the most expensive \$28 you ever saved.

Under the proposal, the federal government would see an \$8.5 billion loss in fuel tax receipts. The American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials estimates that such a cut could result in the reduction of nearly 300,000 jobs.

This does not even begin to calculate the effect on our economy, considering we are losing ground to other countries that are investing heavily in their entire transportation network to move goods and people more efficiently.

We would all like a break from high gas prices. They hurt us at the pump and they cost us everywhere else -- in the price of goods we buy and trips we take, for example. There are many avenues that must be pursued to achieve the goal of affordable fuel.

Taking a "holiday" from reality just isn't one of them.

Thompson, of Madison, is executive director of the Transportation Development Association of Wisconsin.