

The FREEMAN

Waukesha County's Daily Newspaper

Cutting gas tax a road to nowhere

Money needed to build, repair highways

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November 16, 2005

Everybody wants to see a reduction in the state's gasoline tax, right?

But what if that led to a decline in roads and the inability to improve the Zoo Interchange and widen the east/west corridor of Interstate 94?

What if it meant that such major local road improvements as highways 59 and 164 were never completed?

What if it meant a decline in simple road maintenance?

As a kid who grew up on the dirt and gravel byways of Muskego, you can count me out if you think I want to return to those days of goat trails and yield signs.

Yet that would be the likely result of various schemes to reduce the tax, which now goes to help fund such projects, says Bob Cook, executive director of the Transportation Development Authority.

In a recent interview, Cook said without the gas tax, the state would have to look to higher motor vehicle registration fees or some other method of raising revenues in order to fund new roads and the widening and care of others.

And he maintains that charging a gas tax is a better way to broaden the burden of road construction because it also captures revenue from tourists and tourism is the state's second largest industry.

Cook's point is that fast growing counties like Waukesha - which is one of the top road building counties in the state - should not be looking to shrink the transportation fund pool.

The state has been spending considerable funds to widen and improve the numbered highways in the county, such as 59 and 164, and has significant plans for others, such as Highway 83. Those highways are the lifelines for orderly and efficient development of the county and its economic growth. Like arteries in the human body, every once in a while they need to be cleared and rehabilitated. The state pays for that as well, using its transportation fund.

If the gas tax were reduced, the revenue stream to the transportation fund would also slow up.

Those who drive to downtown Milwaukee from Waukesha County during rush hours already know the congestion problems involved in that commute. If the fund is shrunk, it will take even longer to widen that stretch of Interstate 94. That will not help the county as it continues to grow and attract new businesses and the jobs and wider property tax base that go with them.

If anything, Cook's call for a widening of the revenue stream for transportation purposes is the direction the state should go. That is because Gov. Jim Doyle decided to raid the fund in his recent budget maneuvers and shift \$250 million from the supposedly segregated transportation fund into funding education.

One plan that was offered for a gas tax holiday would have reduced the current 29.5 cents gas tax by 15 cents from Labor Day to New Year's, shrinking the fund even more. It sounded like an appealing idea until the consequences for roads were weighed.

Plans such as charging tolls are not going to be met with favor. And the city of Oconomowoc decided recently to reconsider a plan to charge a separate fee for road construction, following a popular outcry that extended well beyond city limits.

So the best philosophy for now is to try to build a fire wall around the existing transportation fund to ensure that it goes for its original purpose. The state should also begin to look for ways to gather more revenues for the major projects in southeastern Wisconsin that are just around the corner, once the Marquette Interchange work is completed.

But cutting the gas tax? Not unless you happen to like traffic jams, broken shock absorbers and potholes.

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