

Craig Thompson: Why we should hike the federal gas tax

Craig Thompson | executive director, Transportation Development Association of Wisconsin | Posted: Wednesday, March 24, 2010 4:40 am

Incredible as it seems, the nation's most important source of surface transportation funding was allowed to lapse at the beginning of this month for the first time in its history, due to a bizarre argument at the federal level in which, somehow, both sides were simultaneously right -- and dead wrong.

On one side of the argument, a single senator took a stand for paying for core government responsibilities and against continuing to descend further into debt. People on the other side said it was irresponsible to allow funding for programs that are universally supported, such as unemployment benefits and transportation, to be shut off just so the senator could score political points.

Both sides are right.

Where they are both wrong is that neither side has stepped forward to offer solutions to actually fund our government, including transportation.

Historically, the federal government has funded surface transportation through six-year authorization bills. The most recent, known by the acronym SAFETEA-LU (for Surface Transportation Efficiency and Accountability Act -- a Legacy for Users), expired last Sept. 30. Since that time Congress has passed short-term measures to keep the program afloat.

The most recent short-term measure expired on Feb. 28, and attempts to extend the program by 30 more days were held up when Sen. Jim Bunning, R-Ky., filibustered. This led to a shutdown in reimbursements to states for highway projects and transit programs. About 2,000 federal Transportation Department employees were furloughed.

Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood responded to Bunning's actions by stating, "As American families are struggling in tough economic times, I am keenly disappointed that political games are putting a stop to important construction projects around the country. This means that construction workers will be sent home from job sites because federal inspectors must be furloughed."

LaHood, of course, was right.

Bunning defended himself by saying, "There are going to be other bills brought to this floor that are not going to be paid for, and I am going to object every time they do it. ... I have got too many young grandchildren that want America to be the same America that I grew up in. And I am worried to death that that is not going to be the case."

Bunning made a very valid point.

Because both are right and wrong, though, we must turn our attention to solving the larger problem that this argument illustrated. And to do that, we have to return to more responsible times. While coming up with enough money in a responsible manner may be more difficult for other portions of the budget, it is quite simple when it comes to funding transportation. We simply need to charge users of the transportation system a fee that actually reflects the cost to maintain and upgrade that system. The user fee we currently have in place -- the federal gas tax -- remains at 18.4 cents a gallon, which is what it was in 1993, when gas cost \$1.11 per gallon.

In 1983, when the country was struggling to come out of a recession, President Reagan increased the gas tax by 5 cents, stating, "We simply cannot allow this magnificent system to deteriorate beyond repair. The time has come to preserve what past Americans spent so much time and effort to create."

In 1990 President George H.W. Bush signed another 5 cent increase in the gas tax. In 1993 President Clinton signed a 4.3 cent increase in the gas tax.

As evidenced by the actions of these three presidents, it was not that long ago that our leaders recognized that we all have a responsibility to pay for our transportation system.

A federal gas tax increase of a dime a gallon would cost the average family about \$9 a month. And it would be an equitable and responsible way to fund the safer and more economically beneficial transportation system we all need and deserve.

Some of the problems that face our nation in this day and age are truly confounding. Solving our transportation mess simply isn't one of them.

Craig Thompson is executive director of [the Transportation Development Association of Wisconsin](#), an alliance representing more than 400 transportation stakeholders including businesses, labor, units of government, organizations and individuals.