

# County officials support a gas tax

Lawmakers waiting to see what bill offers.

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Supporters of a state gas tax know they face an uphill battle mired with potholes, both literal and figurative.

Mostly they face the concerns of fellow citizens who worry about having more taken out of already thin billfolds, as well as cries of "What's in it for us?"

But to see roads safer, expanded and absent those treacherous potholes is worth their time and effort.

The one positive bit of news so far is Democratic Gov. Chet Culver did not explicitly take it off the table this year.

"The governor's stance is that he's not particularly interested in it, but he hasn't shut it out," said Brian Carter, Des Moines County engineer.

Carter, along with a delegation of supervisors and Highway 61 coalition supporters, went up to Des Moines Wednesday to advocate for an 8-cent gas tax.

"It's a true user tax," Carter said. "It helps take care of the system. It's not getting any younger."

Supporters say the increase would cost the average person \$35.20, estimating about 12,000 miles per year on a vehicle that gets 27.5 miles to the gallon.

They're also happy to tell dissenters the tax hasn't been raised in 20 years and is less than every surrounding state except Missouri.

"The nice part about the gas tax is the highway fund is protected," said Des Moines County Supervisor Bob Beck, who is vice chair of the Highway 61 coalition. "It is pretty much for building new roads and fixing roads."

As far as Carter is concerned, the nice part about the tax is it is shared by out-of-state

drivers, which make up about 35 percent of truck traffic and 15 percent of passenger cars on Iowa roads.

Carter said without a tax, one of the only options is to start closing roads.

"I haven't heard anybody call and ask me for that," Carter said. "Better ideas are always welcome."

If the local supporters are able to form a network and get the support of the governor, their next task will be winning over a bipartisan mix of lawmakers.

The simplest way to do that is inundate their e-mails and voicemails with messages from constituents who favor the user fee.

"We need them to stand up and give their opinion," Beck said.

Sen. Tom Courtney, D-Burlington, said he's been a supporter of increasing the gas tax since before the governor took it off last session.

He said the best thing constituents can do is get the attention of their lawmakers. Courtney said it worked when the citizens made a public outcry about the touch-screen machines.

"That's what it takes, everybody getting excited about it," Courtney said. "Both parties need to get those kinds of calls and e-mails."

While Beck said he got the impression Rep. Tom Sands, R-Columbus Junction, was on the fence about the tax increase, the lawmaker's response mimicked a colleague on the other side of the aisle.

Both Sands and Rep. Dennis Cohoon, D-Burlington, said they could see the debate from both sides, supporters who like the equitable way the tax will be applied and the opposition who can't bear to face any additional tax.

"That's the down side ... is this a good time to be raising any kind of tax like that?" Cohoon said. "Here's the need that we have, and here's how much we're generating."

Two years ago the Iowa Department of Transportation outlined a shortfall of \$200 million. The lawmakers stepped up in 2008 to increase license and registration fees, though they are staggered in implementation and still don't meet the full shortfall.

After the floods, the need is \$267 million.

Also, the road use tax fund revenue increased 0.4 percent in fiscal year 2007 and 2.9 percent in fiscal year 2008 but the construction costs in Iowa increased 26 percent.

Sen. Gene Fraise, D-Fort Madison, said due to the support Courtney gave to get the Fort Madison bypass rolling, he would happily support any effort, including a gas tax, to speed up an expansion of U.S. 61 between Burlington and Muscantine County.

First-year state lawmaker Keokuk Democratic Rep. Jerry Kearns said any bill that comes forward would be worth looking at, but he hasn't formed an opinion yet on the gas tax.

"I'm going to keep an open mind," Kearns said.

Even lawmakers who would support the gas tax say the bill has to be bipartisan.

"Unfortunately, it shouldn't be that kind of an issue, because it's just way too vital to drag down just because of politics," Carter said. "Ultimately, no matter what side you sit on, that's what citizens expect."