



Gas tax could fuel legislature

By Scott Levine

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— CLINTON — Julie Allesee joined about 50 people at the statehouse Wednesday to discuss a possible solution to Iowa's infrastructure.

The proposal is Time 21, an initiative to raise the gas tax by five to eight cents. For this to become reality, Allesee, the Clinton Area Chamber of Commerce president, and Iowa's legislators will have to convince one of the plan's biggest critics — Gov. Chet Culver.

A gas tax does not appear in Culver's proposed budget, and according to the Associated Press, Culver told reporters that raising taxes during a recession would be a mistake.

Instead, Culver has outlined a plan to spend \$700 million in bonding, something Rep. Steve Olson, R-DeWitt, does not want to see.

"I'm not really sure why he (Culver) doesn't want to do that (gas tax)," Olson said in an interview with the Clinton Herald. "He's pushing a \$700 million bonding issue and that's going to come out of the citizens' pocketbooks at some point."

Along with Olson, Allesee said other local legislators like House Speaker Pro Tempore Polly Bukta, D-Clinton, and Sen. Roger Stewart, D-Preston, backed the measure that would dispense 60 percent of the revenue to the state and 20 percent apiece for the county and city.

"I would anticipate it would go to the legislature this session," Olson said. "I'm not in the driver's seat, but the majority party will reach an agreement with the governor that he would sign prior to running with it."

Gasoline is taxed 22 cents per gallon, while diesel gets 23.5 cents taxed to it per gallon, giving Iowa the 32nd-highest fuel tax in the United States. Illinois and Wisconsin rank No. 3 and No. 9 respectively, while Missouri is 46th.

If approved, Iowa would jump into the top 20.

Allesee said the tax will help Iowa's infrastructure progression compared with neighboring states.

"We are advocating a user fee," Allesee said. "The user fee is an easier pill to swallow than bonding, because bonding goes to property tax. The gas tax actually goes to the user. You pay as you go."

Currently, the budget shortfall for highway improvement is around \$200 million. According to the Iowa Department of Transportation, Iowa is 13th in the country in the number of roadway miles.

The DOT's numbers also note that the state ranks 32nd in rural interstate condition, 47th in urban interstate condition, 43rd in rural arterial condition and 34th in deficient bridges. This 2008 report utilizes statistics from 2006.

Improving road conditions for Clinton County is one reason Olson supports the plan.

"I just have to look at the state of the county roads in Clinton County, a county with one of the largest amount of county roads, to know we need more funding," Olson said. "This is the most equitable way to do it."

Allesee said trucks would shoulder most of the burden with the increased tax. According to the Iowa DOT, vehicles traveled 31.481 billion miles over Iowa public road systems in 2007, with large trucks trekking 2.974 billion of those miles.

The plan's detractors contend that raising the tax could saddle businesses with higher prices, since trucks carrying items such as food, supplies and other materials could increase fees.

"This is the best formula we could come with that would do what needs to be done for the state," Allesee said. "We're already behind and the winter weather has exasperated the problem. Our roads are deteriorating and we can't continue to withstand this traffic."

Allesee and Olson also said the increased revenue would create jobs through added roadway projects.

"If we don't do something, there will probably be some layoffs," Olson said. "This is an economic growth issue and if we keep doing what have been doing, it will be bad.

"It will be astronomical to repair the roads if something doesn't get done."

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Photos



Brendan Bartels pumps gas in his car in Clinton on Thursday. Jerry Dahl/Clinton Herald