

Iowa gas tax increase might fuel rural roads funding

By James Q. Lynch
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DES MOINES n A robust rural economy is impossible without a well-maintained rural road system, and local officials are asking Iowa lawmakers to fully fund the state's transportation plan n even if it means a gas tax increase.

Increased traffic, the worst winter in recent memory, historic flooding and higher costs have put them in a bind, city and county officials told the Senate Transportation Committee recently.

"Our costs have increase wildly," Lyle Brehm, county engineer for Poweshiek and Tama counties, said. Fuel costs are up and along with them the price of petroleum-based asphalt has gone from \$200 to \$600 or more per ton.

To meet their needs, counties "support a significant increase in the fuel tax to help fully fund the TIME-21," Iowa State Association of Counties Executive Director Bill Peterson said Wednesday.

County secondary roads are used more heavily than ever, often with equipment that is far heavier than planned for when the pavements and bridges were built, Peterson said. "But revenues have been flat and expenses have increases dramatically."

County engineers told senators earlier this month the use of rural roads is changing as more non-farm residents rely on them to get to work. The rise of the ethanol industry means corn is being moved year-round. Livestock producers, who by necessity often locate operations in remote areas, need access to those facilities on a daily basis.

Last winter, Delaware County faced the choice of plowing roads for people or for animals, Mark Nahra, the former county engineer there, told the committee. One three-mile stretch of rural road served nine livestock feeding operations, but no homes, "so we had to give it priority," said Nahra, now the Woodbury County engineer.

The county engineers said they have cut their staffs, contracted for some maintenance functions and closed and vacated roads where possible.

"The counties are so lean there's nothing left to cut," Nahra said.

Iowa City is feeling the pinch, too, Public Works Director Rick Fosse said. As a result, it's deferring maintenance, but it "always comes due and is more costly than timely maintenance."

Without action by the state Peterson predicted driver will see an "initially imperceptible but quickly accelerating decline."

"Road users will encounter more pot holes, bad sections, closed bridges and frost boil embargoes year by year unless action is taken now," he said.

Transportation Committee Chairman Tom Rielly, D-Oskaloosa, is aware of local governments' "sense of urgency." He has suggested the solution may lie in a gas tax hike. He expects subcommittee work on an 8-cent gas tax increase to start next week.