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## Yepsen: Support edges up for road funding

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A new poll commissioned by the road lobby shows Iowans are more willing to pay higher gas taxes for highway work in the wake of the Minnesota bridge collapse.

The poll, done by Victory Enterprises of Davenport for the Iowa Good Roads Association and the Associated General Contractors of Iowa, shows 48.3 percent favor a gas-tax increase while 45.9 percent are opposed. Support increases as respondents are told of rising construction costs, Iowa's deficient bridges and the fact the state Constitution requires gas-tax revenues go only for roads.

The poll of 657 registered voters was taken Aug. 7 to 8 and has a margin of error of 3.8 percent.

The numbers show even stronger support for increasing pickup-truck registration fees so they're on a par with other vehicles. That idea would net \$54 million more for the state's road fund and there are 63.7 percent of Iowa's registered voters who support such a move.

You'd expect lobbying groups to tout a poll that underscores their arguments, and these two organizations certainly are. But the survey work seems legit - they hired a conservative Republican polling firm to do the poll - and the research is likely to nudge state lawmakers along the path of coming up with more money for infrastructure repair during next year's legislative session.

Last year, well before the Minnesota tragedy, Iowa lawmakers and the governor approved a law outlining how any additional road dollars would be spent. The new law requires that 60 percent of the new revenues go into the state's interstates, commercial highways or roads to biofuels plants. Another 20 percent is to go for rural bridge repair or farm-to-market roads. The last 20 percent is for municipal road upkeep.

Studies have shown Iowa needs to raise an additional \$200 million a year to maintain, update and sometimes expand the state's existing road network.

This fall, a legislative committee will begin work on finding ways to raise that money. Gov. Chet Culver has also said he will present a package of ideas to lawmakers, though he has been cool toward raising the gas tax. Most politicians are, especially when it will be an election year and motorists already are complaining about high gas prices.

That's why the poll is significant - because it shows that despite the strain of high gas prices, there is a growing public understanding of the need to pay for road work.

It should also ease concerns the Legislature's Democratic majority has about raising taxes in an election year, especially after lawmakers increased the cigarette tax last year.

But before the politicians go running off to raise taxes and fees, they need to do two things to make that medicine go down a little easier.

First, the state Department of Transportation needs to show how it can save money in administrative and other costs. The department has done a good job of saving money in recent years, but many taxpayers still believe it's a wasteful agency.

Second, the politicians need to put some restrictions on these farm grain wagons and their use of roads and bridges. Their heavy weights, concentrated on relatively few axles, do considerable damage to our highways.

The last thing urban dwellers, who pay most of the gas taxes in this state, want is to pay more at the pump just so farmers get to tear up roads at harvest time.

Farmers shouldn't have a God-given right to damage roads and bridges any more than they should have a God-given right to pollute the air or water - or pay cheap pickup-truck license fees.

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