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DOT funding focus of legislative forum



State Rep. Rod Roberts (left) and State Sen. Steve Kettering share a laugh at Saturday's Carroll Chamber of Commerce legislative forum at Zion Lutheran Church in Arcadia. The main topic of discussion was the Iowa DOT's call for a \$200 million increase in highway funding. (Photo by Butch Heman)

ARCADIA - The Department of Transportation's plan to boost highway funding by \$200 million annually was the topic of discussion at Saturday's Carroll Chamber of Commerce legislative forum.

State Rep. Rod Roberts said Time 21, a study the DOT performed at the request of the Legislature, would alter the road-use-tax formula, increasing the percentages for the state and cities but cutting the counties' share from 35 to 20 percent. The state's take would rise from 57.5 to 60 percent, while the cities' share would grow from 7.5 to 20 percent.

Roberts, a Carroll Republican who serves on the House Transportation Committee, said a funding proposal in the House wouldn't raise the gasoline tax but would boost diesel tax 2 cents over two years.

"On the House side ... the dollars required would be generated through increases in vehicle registrations and driver-license fees," Roberts told an audience of 35 at the Zion Lutheran Church basement.

The pickup registration fee would nearly double, from \$65 to \$125, while floors would be set on fees for passenger cars and other vehicles.

A proposal in the Senate would raise fuel taxes.

"I think there's been more discussion and study on the House side," said Roberts. "What I find interesting is the fundamental discussion and choice you're going to make is, is it only lowans who make up the \$200 million or would we have people who drive through Iowa also contribute? If you simply fund it through increased (vehicle) registrations, (driver) license fees, et cetera, you're basically saying lowans would pay for those additional resources. That's a pretty important policy decision that needs to be discussed."

What's encouraging for rural Iowa, he said, is the state's emphasis on renewable fuels should mean more funds for highway projects in western Iowa, such as the four-laning of U.S. Highways 30 and 20.

Another factor in the Time 21 discussion is the state use tax, which would generate an additional \$54 million if the Legislature passes a statewide school infrastructure tax since it's now been approved in all 99 counties.

Since Friday is the Legislature's second "funnel," when House files sent to the Senate must be voted out of committee and vice versa to be eligible for passage this year, any bill to modify transportation funding will probably have to be done via a special leadership bill. Roberts said Gov. Chet Culver would also have to voice support for such a bill to pass on short notice.

"I'm at least open to being a part of the discussion here," Roberts said. "But there's nothing set in stone yet about what we'd be making a decision about."

State Sen. Steve Kettering said that in his chamber, Time 21 hasn't been discussed outside the Transportation Committee.

"I think everyone's open to taking a look at the study," he remarked. "Do I think it will happen this year? Probably not. But if the governor comes out and says he wants this \$200 million tax increase this year, it'll probably come to the table. If he doesn't, I don't think it will."

While answering questions about the DOT plan, Kettering said it's funny how some lawmakers are crying that Iowa has a funding crisis.

"Now, we didn't have a crisis in our funding when we were at \$429 million and still counting for (rebuilding) I-235 through Des Moines," he said. "We haven't had a crisis in our funding when we can spend \$541 million for the Avenue of the Saints in eastern Iowa. Now that maybe Highway 30 and Highway 20 are rising to the point they might be considered, all of a sudden we have a crisis in funding."

The Capitol is buzzing as the second funnel nears.

"This last week quite a few bills were passed off the House floor. We probably averaged 15 or 20 bills a day," said Roberts.

The Senate passed a bill that would allow voters to register at the polls on election day.

"Other states have it, and there has been up to 10 percent increase in voter turnout, which is a positive thing," Kettering commented. "The concern expressed by some folks on the floor and in the discussions was that in some areas there were actually more votes cast than there were voters to cast them. So that's the opportunity for fraud that exists in this legislation. We'll just move forward and see how it works in Iowa. I hope we can continue to have a tradition of clean elections in Iowa."

Once the funnel passes the Legislature will focus on the 2007-08 budget, Roberts said. The session is expected to end in late April.

The next forum will be at 10 a.m. Saturday, April 14, at the Carroll Middle School media center.