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## Look to the future: Raise state gas tax

*The Register's editorial*

Start with the premise that Iowa must have a good transportation system so that people can get where they need to go and so the economy can grow.

Next, recall that state officials a couple of years ago warned that Iowa needed an additional \$200 million a year over the next 20 years on top of the \$1.4 billion spent each year already on roads and bridges. Deferred work, plus flood damage and rough winters, has bumped the estimated annual additional need to \$267 million.

That brings us to today's discussion in the Legislature about whether to boost by 8 cents the tax paid on each gallon of gas bought in Iowa.

Yes, the timing is bad because the recession is gripping everyone's pocketbook, making it hard to think about spending more on anything that's not absolutely necessary right now.

Still, lawmakers should pass the increase, because the state will be better off in the short and long term:

- Delaying needed road and bridge repairs would result in more deterioration, costing taxpayers more over time. It could also jeopardize motorist safety.

- The tax is paid by users, and it's not outrageous. An 8-cent boost to the 21-cent current state gas tax would cost an Iowan who drives 12,000 miles a year with a car that gets 25 miles per gallon about \$40 a year, according to state Sen. Tom Rielly, who chairs the Senate Transportation Committee. Iowa still would have far from the highest state gas tax in the nation.

- That 8 cents a gallon would generate \$168 million a year toward meeting infrastructure needs over the long haul, Rielly estimates. Needs for repair and new construction have outstripped available funds due to flat revenue and skyrocketing material costs, he said. The \$358 million in the federal stimulus package for Iowa transportation projects is helpful, but one-time money.

- It would create jobs. Rielly has said that every \$100 million invested in transportation projects creates 5,000 jobs. Combined with the injection of federal stimulus dollars and Gov. Chet Culver's proposed \$700 million bonding program for a variety of infrastructure projects, if it passes, thousands of Iowans could be put to work.

Rielly, an Oskaloosa Democrat, is proposing the gas-tax increase with great reluctance. "If we could find some other way to come up with \$267 million, I'd be open to doing it, but there is nothing else out there that has (less) impact on the average Iowans than this does," he said. "I am open to all kinds of ideas, but ... imagine where we go two years from now if we don't do anything. And the best part ... is we will put people back to work and stimulate our economy."

Culver is opposed to the increase, though he hasn't said with certainty he would veto it, said spokesman Phil Roeder, who described the governor's concern as twofold: Given the recession, "it is just not the right time to raise taxes this way. And second, he feels a lot of what the gas tax would be used for is also being addressed in other ways through his stimulus plan and the federal stimulus."

A lot of Iowans understandably will share Culver's aversion to raising the gas tax during a global economic downturn that looks to be worsening.

But Iowa still needs to look to the future, or the state will be poorly positioned to prosper when the recovery begins.

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