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Friday, February 13, 2009

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Your Capitol Voice: Pros and cons to an increase in fuel tax

by *Jeff Kaufmann, State Representative* · Op-Ed · February 11, 2009

One of the key issues in the state capitol right now is the fuel tax and the condition of our roads and bridges. A few years ago the Legislature passed TIME 21, which was a plan to improve our roads and infrastructure. There was widespread agreement that \$200 million was needed to meet the minimum need in the state.

Last year, registration fees were raised on vehicles and trailers with a business/farm truck category that is less. Many of you have already experienced these increased fees. I voted “no” to this proposal for a variety of reasons outlined in a previous column.

The key was that last year’s bill did not raise the \$200 million. The Governor, early on in last year’s session, removed a fuel tax increase from consideration. This essentially eliminated any chance we would meet the minimum need.

The fuel tax issue is back again. We knew that it would be revisited when the road/infrastructure needs were not fully funded last year. I know this issue is important to my constituents. I have Highway 30, Highway 61, and Interstate 80 in my District. There are several other trouble spots like Highway 130 east of Bennett, Highway 6 between West Liberty and Iowa City, and the Mt. Vernon/Lisbon bypass. In addition there are multiple major projects on our county lists that are years from reality.

Part of me, quite frankly, remembers the infrastructure dollars used last session to balance a bloated budget. Why weren’t we better stewards of these dollars? I voted “no” but these ill-advised decisions were still implemented. This session, I can complain or I can try to help with a solution. I can assure you that it is very hard for me when my votes did not create this problem.

So what do we do? Here are some pros and cons of an increase in the fuel tax.

Pros

1. It is the only way outside of tolls, to capture out-of-state drivers and dollars.
2. It affects the actual users, unlike registration fees that impact everyone including seniors who may drive very little.
3. It is supported by a wide variety of groups including Farm Bureau and the Iowa Motor Truck Association. It is not opposed by lowans for Tax Relief since they consider it a “user fee” and the fund is constitutionally protected to be used for only roads and infrastructure.

Cons

1. Call it a “user fee” or a “revenue enhancement,” it is still more money out of your pockets.
2. We had more than \$100 million in casino revenue tagged for infrastructure that was transferred to the general fund last year. (A fiscally irresponsible move in my opinion.)
3. What if the price of fuel skyrockets again or if the feds also raise the fuel tax?

There is much to consider. I know that a fuel tax of 10 cents, for instance, is not acceptable. I am also torn on the inclusion of biodiesel. I believe we should consider tying any gas tax increase with some reduction in registration fees.

Where do I stand? If I had to vote right now, I am a “no.” But in a multitude of correspondence and at my Listening Posts, I am hearing from many people who want me to consider this. In fact I am taken aback at the amount of conservatives who are encouraging me to reconsider.

Here is what I need: Please contact me and tell me what you think. Should we consider an increase (5-7 cents) in the fuel tax if it is guaranteed to be used for only roads and infrastructure? Flood me with e-mails and letters! My vote will reflect your opinions if there is a clear direction.

Local capitol visitors this week: Bob and Jan Fulwider, West Liberty; Angie Walter, West Branch.

My contact information: E-mail me: jeff.kaufmann@legis.state.ia.us; Write me: State Capitol Des Moines IA 50319; Call me: 1-515-281-3221

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