

Speakers at hearing recommend raising gasoline tax

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By THOMAS GEYER, For The Globe GazetteNorth Iowa Media Group | Posted: Wednesday, August 10, 2011 11:00 pm | (8) Comments

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DAVENPORT — Increasing Iowa’s gasoline tax was recommended by the majority of speakers who addressed the first public input meeting of Gov. Terry Branstad’s Transportation 2020 Citizens Advisory Commission.

About 60 people attended Wednesday’s two-hour session in Bettendorf. Of those, 19 spoke to six panelists that included commission co-chairmen Nancy Richardson, Coralville, and Allan Thoms, Cedar Rapids, as well as state Rep. Jim Lykam, D-Davenport, an ex officio member.

Richardson is the former director of the Iowa Department of Transportation.

There are 12 members of the commission as well as four ex officio members.

Clinton County farmer Joe Dierickx said because the county’s farm-to-market roads and bridges need to be maintained, raising the gasoline tax would be a good idea.

“I support a modest tax increase for rural roads,” Dierickx said. “The agricultural business is important to the state’s economy.”

To save money, Dierickx added, some roads do not need to be plowed. He did not specify which areas he was referring to.

The idea of leaving some roads unsalted and unplowed during winter weather was echoed by Camanche City Administrator Tom Roth.

“Back when I was growing up they didn’t salt the streets or plow the roads,” Roth said. “We lived with it.”

North Scott School District Superintendent Jeff Schwiebert also supported a higher gasoline tax by telling the panel that the county roads are not just for farm-to-market.

“They are kids-to-school roads,” Schwiebert said. “We need to look at county funding to make the roads safe so kids and parents can get to school.”

Branstad ordered the commission to assist the Iowa Department of Transportation in completing a mandated review of current and projected funding levels of Iowa’s Road Use Tax Fund.

Stuart Anderson of the DOT’s programming and modal division told the audience that flat revenues over the past 10 years, coupled with increasing construction costs, have left the state short on money for construction and upkeep of roads and bridges.

Additionally, Anderson said fuel tax revenue has suffered due to higher fuel efficiency standards of vehicles as well as an increase in alternative fuel vehicles on the road.

Unless something is done to generate money for roads and bridges, drivers will find the infrastructure falling into disrepair, he said.

For instance, of the 24,799 bridges in the state, Anderson said, 5,000 are in need of work.

“That will cost about \$2 billion. About half of the state’s bridges were built in the 1960s or sooner,” he said.

Scott County Supervisor Larry Minard, who attended the meeting but did not speak, said afterward that the gasoline tax has not been raised since 1989 but that the state’s transportation needs have changed dramatically.

Minard also said that he was intrigued with the notion of taxing the miles driven on hybrid and electric cars.

“They need to pay their fair share of the transportation costs,” he said of the owners of fuel-efficient vehicles.

There will be six more meetings around the state in August and September. They will be held in Council Bluffs, Des Moines, Mason City, Mount Pleasant, Storm Lake and Waterloo.

— Thomas Geyer is a reporter for the Quad-City Times, a Lee Enterprises newspaper.