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Branstad would bypass gas-tax increase, direct traffic-cam funds to state

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By Rod Boshart Journal Des Moines Bureau | Posted: Wednesday, December 21, 2011 7:30 pm | (2) Comments

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DES MOINES -- Gov. Terry Branstad said Wednesday he expects Iowa will have enough extra transportation money to meet critical needs next year without having to consider a boost in the state gas tax during the upcoming election-year legislative session.

However, Sen. Matt McCoy, D-Des Moines, said he expected a bipartisan group of House and Senate members would push for a phased gas tax increase after lawmakers convene Jan. 9 that would propose a 5-cents-per-gallon increase beginning Jan. 1, 2013, and another nickel increase on Jan. 1, 2014. He said there are indications the bill would get favorable treatment if it makes it to the governor's desk.

In an interview, Branstad did not address that question directly, saying he has asked the state Department of Transportation to find \$50 million in cost savings. He noted DOT officials expect to have an extra \$128 million for projects in 2012 thanks to favorable bid prices, budget savings and receipt of federal funding that exceeded forecast amounts.

"We're going to be able to have one of the most robust road-building programs for this coming year that we've ever had," the governor said. "So the problem isn't this coming year. It's going to be subsequent years."

He said "down the road" he expects a phased increase in the "highway user fee" could need to be considered to address a projected \$200 million yearly shortfall. The governor also indicated he supported putting the money generated by controversial traffic-monitoring cameras directly into the state road use tax fund to be redistributed by formula to Iowa communities as a way to address public concerns the devices are being installed for revenue rather than safety reasons.

"If they're truly being done for public safety, then why not put all the revenue from it in the road-use tax fund? Then there's no incentive for a community to do it just for the revenue for themselves," Branstad said. "To me, that's an alternative worth looking at."

Sen. Brad Zaun, R-Urbandale, who tried unsuccessfully to ban traffic-monitoring cameras last legislative session, said he believes there will be a push in 2012 to channel revenue from the devices into the statewide road fund and establish uniform guidelines and restrictions on how and where they are operated.

McCoy said he expected lawmakers would consider legislation to place a moratorium on more communities installing the cameras, limiting fines and enforcement practices, and possibly considering an outright ban.

Earlier this month, Senate President Jack Kibbie, D-Emmetsburg, advocated that lawmakers sidestep Branstad's call for taking a gas tax increase off the table for one year by passing a measure and sending it to his desk for his signature.

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On Wednesday, Branstad said he doubted that would happen in an election-year session.

"I first want to see us do the savings and then I'm willing to look at increasing the motor fuel user fee after we've done that," the governor said in an interview. "I think it's very unlikely that either party is going to want to put their caucus through a vote on it in this year. Now maybe that changes. I don't know."

House Speaker Kraig Paulsen, R-Hiawatha, said Monday the focus of House members will be to make certain current road use tax dollars are being spent effectively.

"Step one is making sure the money we're already receiving from lowans is being used wisely, and then we'll see where that takes us," Paulsen said.

"In a billion-dollar fund, I don't think it's unreasonable to look for \$50 million in savings before we raise a tax," added House Majority Leader Linda Upmeyer, R-Garner, during a legislative forum earlier this month.

At the same time, top legislators noted that the Iowa Farm Bureau Federation has joined county engineers, contractors and good roads groups in supporting a gas tax increase, and some businesses are increasingly concerned about deteriorating conditions on some roads and bridges.

"I would just say stay tuned," advised Senate Majority Leader Mike Gronstal, D-Council Bluffs. "There continue to be people that are talking about that. There continues to be real concern about the highway system in the state of Iowa and a lot of people interested in helping find resources for that. So we'll see.

"Without some solid indication that the governor would sign it or the House would pass it and I think the same thing vice versa for them, I don't think anybody's going to go out on a limb alone on this, but I'm not positive it's completely off the table," Gronstal added.

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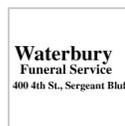


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