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Farmers not yet asked to pay for road repairs

Story Discussion

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By MATTHEW WILDE, matt.wilde@wfcourier.com | Posted: Wednesday, November 2, 2011 4:00 pm | (2) Comments

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Three grain trucks come and go at the intersection near the Sinclair Elevator near Parkersburg, Iowa on Tuesday, October 4, 2011. (RICK CHASE / Courier Staff Photographer)

WAVERLY, Iowa --- Farmers won't be asked, at least for now, to pay a bigger share to fix and maintain the state's roads and bridges.

The Governor's Transportation 2020 Citizen Advisory Commission recently decided on a three-step approach to pay for urgent transportation projects. Agriculture wasn't singled out, to the relief of producers and farm organizations.

An 8- to 10-cent increase in Iowa's gas tax, a 1 percent hike in new vehicle registration fees and a new user fee for hybrid vehicles will be submitted by the citizen's commission Tuesday to the Iowa Department of Transportation Commission. The

DOT will then make recommendations to lawmakers who have the final say.

"We have serious problems with our roads, and we need to generate money to fix them. By raising the fuel tax, we all pay our fair share," said Dennis Schnadt, a farmer near Sumner.

About \$215 million is needed to address "critical" infrastructure needs and more than \$1 billion to cover all transportation projects, according to state officials. Agriculture has contributed to the deterioration of roads and bridges. Equipment has become bigger, and more and more producers are relying on semis to transport grain and livestock to market. During a series of statewide meetings hosted by the commission to garner ideas on how to increase revenues, agriculture was occasionally a target. Some suggestions included:

- A 1-cent-per-bushel charge on corn and soybeans.
- Establish registration fees for farm equipment.
- Eliminate farm-use exemptions. For example, farm-use diesel doesn't include a 22.5-cent-per-gallon state tax and a \$1,000 new vehicle registration fee doesn't apply to pickups for animal husbandry.

The Iowa Farm Bureau Federation applauded the group's recommendations.

"Our members believe it's imperative to repair roads and bridges to help rural Iowa thrive," said Craig Lang, federation president, in a statement. "We believe that an increase in the fuel tax is the fairest way to fund those repairs because it charges people who actually use the roads whether they live in Iowa or are from out of state."

Allan Thoms, co-chair of the citizens' group, said requiring farmers to chip in more for transportation needs wasn't practical at this time. However, that could change.

Thoms, a former chairman of the Iowa Utilities Board and DOT commissioner from Cedar Rapids, is confident the fairest and quickest ways to raise money were found.

"We've got a major road crisis in the state. Let's get started taking care of our critical needs," Thoms said.

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The citizens' commission asked the DOT to compile a report by June 30, 2012, of tax and fee breaks the state offers, including to the agricultural sector.

"We'll continue to look at other ways" down the road, Thoms added.

If that means paying a registration fee on a planter or more taxes on diesel fuel, Schnadt said he's willing to do it as long as it solves the state's transportation infrastructure woes.

"As farmers we have to pay our fair share, too," he said.

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