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Iowa City pushes legislature for more road funds

BY [ASMAA ELKERUTI](#) | NOVEMBER 14, 2011 7:20 AM

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Iowa City city councilors said they want legislators to make increasing the road-use tax fund a priority in the next legislative session.

Councilors said the push for an increase in the road-use tax fund, which puts money toward road and bridge maintenance, would be less costly for Iowa City taxpayers and help Iowa City improve and maintain deteriorating roads.

"There are a lot of roads that need repairs in Iowa City," said City Councilor Connie Champion, and when funds from the road-use tax fund fall short, the city turns to bonds, and the bill is ultimately footed by Iowa City's taxpayers.

As Iowa drivers' gas use decreases, less money is generated from the gas tax, Champion said.

"It's time for the state to raise the road-use tax, which it hasn't done for a long, long time," she said.

Gov. Terry Branstad held off on passing a gas tax increase last week, which generates revenue for the road-use tax, IowaPolitics.com reported.

Some legislators said they felt officials should look closely at road use tax fund proposals, considering no changes have been made to the fund since 1989.

The road-use tax fund is about \$1.1 billion per year in Iowa, according to Sen. Tom Rielly, D-Oskaloosa. In order for the state to improve critical road conditions, it would have to raise more than \$200 million in taxes for the fund. Such conditions include roads and bridges that are on the verge of being closed, said Rep. David Tjepkes, R-Gowrie, a member of the Transportation 2020 Citizen Advisory Committee.

"My position is I think legislators should have an open and honest debate on that issue and let the chips fall where they may," Tjepkes said.

A 1 percent increase in registration and title tax fees would add \$50 million to the fund, on top of the \$20 million for every penny added to the gas tax, said Sen. Tod Bowman, D-Maquoketa.

Champion said Iowa City plans to send soon-to-be-hired lobbyist to the state to push for a change in legislation.

"Lobbyists are very effective; sometimes we don't like them, but strong lobbyists control a lot of the laws that go into effect," she said. "They're representing us, and they have access to legislators and access to committees."

Some city and state officials said they're worried about road-use proposals getting through Branstad.

"I don't believe this will go anywhere unless the governor is ready to commit himself to being on board with this," Bowman said. "If the governor's not on board, it'll be a tough fight to win. I'm guessing, without his support, there's little chance of that happening."

Rep. Mary Mascher, D-Iowa City, agreed.



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"I think Iowa City understands the political realities that we're up against, but they also understand its importance. This issue is one that rises to the top," she said. "Whether it gets support or not, it's a high priority for the people of Iowa City."

Tjepkes said the road-use fund is a pressing issue statewide.

"I think it's well-established we have an immediate infrastructure problem in so far as maintaining and repairing bridges," he said.

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