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Pedely backs report calling for gas-tax hike

By DOUGLAS BURNS
Staff Writer

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Motivated by concerns over depleting Road Use Tax money for local streets, and Iowa's roads in general, Carroll Mayor Jim Pedely has long pressed state legislators and two governors for an increase in the gas tax to boost transportation infrastructure funds.

This morning, Pedely said he was highly encouraged by a report released Wednesday from the Governor's Transportation 2020 Citizens Advisory Commission that recommended a state gas tax increase of 8 to 10 cents per gallon and new-vehicle-registration fees to raise an estimated \$280 million annually for road and bridge work. The recommendation — which has been informed by public hearings around the state, one attended by representatives from Carroll County — also calls for an increase in the new-vehicle-registration fee from 5 percent to 6 percent of the purchase price.

With the report in hand, the Iowa Department of Transportation will determine whether it seeks all or part of the recommendations from lawmakers next session — an election year.

"If the Legislature decides to act on this that would be good news for the state, the county, the cities, across Iowa," Pedely said.

Iowa has not had an increase in the 22-cent-a-gallon tax on gasoline since 1989. One cent of that goes to underground storage tank cleanup, and the remainder to road work in Iowa.

"That to me is important," Pedely said of the directed benefits from the pump to the road.

Pedely, who saw the anti-tax fervor in the state up close and personal with the August defeat of a referendum to build a new library in Carroll, says there are clearly forces aligned behind no tax increases. But he said the gas tax may be more palatable to Iowans than other collections.

"We all know the difference between the newly paved portion of Highway 141 and the road that is in need of repair," Pedely said.

Carroll City Manager Gerald Clausen was part of a contingent of Carroll city and county officials, as well as members of the Carroll Area Development Corp. who attended a Storm Lake meeting in September of the transportation panel.

The message from Clausen: streets and highway funding is central to the vitality of the state.

"Virtually every person uses, or depends upon, someone that uses a roadway every day," Clausen told the commission.

Cities like Carroll are struggling for new ways to fund street work as the money flowing from the state's Road Use Tax Fund isn't meeting local needs. The city is strongly considering dipping into local-option sales-tax revenues to pay for roads, which would back-seat efforts to fund a number of other municipal initiatives. Iowa counties are in the same situation with the road fund, which is financed largely through gas taxes and certain licensing fees. The Carroll County Board of Supervisors considered using tax-increment financing with wind turbines ringing Carroll to help fund road work.

Clausen said the deterioration of roads continues as fuel prices, construction costs and commodity prices continue to rise.

It makes no sense, Clausen said, not to increase the gas tax, which is directed specifically at improving Iowa's transportation infrastructure.

"Everything is rising, but we have a fear of not raising taxes," Clausen said.

Gov. Terry Branstad last winter appointed the Transportation 2020 Citizens Advisory Commission.



Mayor Jim Pedely

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Branstad has said a gas-tax increase is not in the offing this year because of the prevailing economic and political climate.

"The timing is just bad," he said in a meeting in January with advocates for U.S. Highway 30, a lobbying group that included a number of people from Carroll County.

Branstad is open to an increase in the future, which he sees as a "user fee" for Iowa's roads, and he has stressed a "pay-as-you-go" approach in which the state avoids bonding or other debt scenarios to fund improvements.

The governor is now reviewing the panel's recommendations.

The gas-tax increase is a priority for the U.S. Highway 30 Coalition, which wants to see state transportation funding increased so four-laning projects on the federal route are accelerated.

Branstad told the U.S. 30 Coalition members he sees a fully four-laned U.S. Highway 30 as relieving the projected congestion on Interstate 80.

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