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THE REGULARS: Highway 20 unlikely without new revenue

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By STEVE WARNSTADT The Regulars columnist | Posted: Friday, November 18, 2011 12:01 pm | 1 Comment

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With Thanksgiving and Christmas approaching, many people will be travelling the state's highways to visit relatives. We often take such trips for granted, forgetting the amount of work to construct and maintain this infrastructure, especially when battered by floods and severe winter storms. One national study concluded that Iowa had the third highest ratio of deficient bridges in the country.

With great fanfare earlier this year, Governor Branstad appointed a bi-partisan citizen's advisory commission of business and transportation experts to review the condition of the state's road system. After months of study, the committee determined that the state faced a funding shortfall of about \$215 million a year.

The committee then held hearings around the state to get feedback on what actions should be taken to address those shortfalls, to include raising revenue. Their recommendations included raising the gas tax and the fee for vehicle registration (formerly known as the use tax). Both revenue streams are required by the state constitution to be used for road construction, maintenance and supervision.

After waiting a few days, Branstad took increased gas taxes off the table. Unlike Chet Culver, he didn't indicate his opposition beforehand. As a simple courtesy and respect to these private citizens, and the hundreds who showed up at the hearings, he could have stated this position before they made their recommendations. That is, unless his revenue plan was for people to buy more gas to attend the hearings.

Instead, Branstad directed the DOT find more efficiencies. During the 12 years he was not in office, the DOT reduced the number of employees by 20 percent, eliminated 39 facilities and reduced its vehicle fleet, freeing up \$45 million for road construction. Despite having fewer workers, the DOT instituted a policy for those renewing a license to be complete in 30 minutes or the license is free. In other words, the DOT is doing more with less.

Some reductions can be made without reducing services - putting off rest area construction or upgrading

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maintenance garages, for example. Eventually, that maintenance will occur, and at a higher cost. Making things more challenging, federal funding for highways may decrease between 20 and 30 percent next year.

In addition to meeting statewide needs, there is a regional reason for taking action. Under present law, the top priority for any revenue increases at the state level is to develop four-lane "Access Iowa Highways." These are the major state highways connecting cities of 20,000 or more. The second priority for increased revenue is to four-lane highways with existing renewable fuel facilities.

When you look at those priorities, one section of the state jumps out, and not by mistake. Because past legislatures developed priorities and made the tough decisions to generate new revenue in an election year, Highway 20 now has four lanes from just north of Rockwell City to the Mississippi River. Everything but the concrete and signs have been set from there to just north of Early.

Some will say we can maintain the existing system and develop Highway 20 without new revenue. I heard lots of that happy talk during Branstad's first four terms, but saw no action, so count me skeptical.

Another alternative is to generate new revenue, whether through increased fee for registration, increased gas taxes (supported by the Farm Bureau), by having farm and commercial pickup owners pay the same tax deductible license fee as individuals (who pay \$100-\$200 more per year), or by other means. Otherwise, we will continue to kick the can down the pot hole-riddled road, incurring higher costs later, and deferring a four-lane Highway 20.

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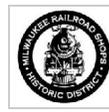
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