

91st AD Dem candidates support gas tax hike, other options to bolster transpo fund

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All four of the Dems aiming to fill outgoing state Rep. Dana Wachs' seat in the Assembly say upping the gas tax is a key step toward solving the state's transportation woes.

Still, the Eau Claire-based candidates disagree on exactly how much it should be increased by and what other options are on the table in addressing the issue.

Rich Postlewaite, a 55-year-old economics and government professor at UW-Stout, is perhaps the most bullish on the gas tax, telling WisPolitics.com this week he'd support increasing it between 7 cents and 10 cents before again indexing it, which pegs the gas tax to the cost of living. While he says he's also open to looking at both higher vehicle registration fees and tolling, he admits he has reservations about both.

"I think a simpler method would be indexing the gas tax and raising the gas tax," he said, noting raising registration fees would hit the poor harder than the wealthy and setting up the tolling system takes time.

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The others seeking the seat didn't commit to supporting a 5 cent gas tax hike in recent interviews with WisPolitics.com, though they all agreed an increase is part of the path forward.

Jodi Emerson, 45, and the former Fierce Freedom director of public policy and community relations in Altoona, said she wouldn't support tolling. While she'd back increasing the vehicle registration fee and gas tax "a little bit," other areas should

be considered as vehicles continue becoming more fuel efficient.

The state budget included higher fees for hybrid and electric vehicles in the state, including a \$75 surcharge on hybrid registrations and a \$100 surcharge on electric vehicle registrations, on top of the already-in-place \$75 vehicle registration fee.

Asked whether she thinks those levels are appropriate, Emerson said she'd need to look more into it before weighing in on whether the rates should be adjusted. She also stressed considering solutions other states have championed, rather than just looking at options Wisconsin has done in the past.

Navy veteran and retired Eau Claire Deputy Police Chief Eric Larsen, 59, says he wants to raise the gas tax and then index it. And Thomas Vue, 57, and a Department of Workforce Development employment and training specialist, says he'd support a gas tax increase and "minor" vehicle registration fee upper, as well as tolling.

Larsen, who currently runs a E. E. Larsen & Associates, also said registration fees should be paid based on the value of the vehicle rather than an across-the-board increase. On tolling, Larsen said he was "skeptical" because the option leaves "too much room for corruption."

"It introduces private interests to funding of our highways and that concerns me," he said.

Meanwhile, the four candidates also touted their backgrounds in city government, state politics, campaigns and more.

For example, both Larsen and Vue previously served on the Eau Claire City Council: Larsen from 2013 to 2017, and Vue from 2004 to 2013. Larsen also noted in the last decade of his police career, he focused on public policy issues over law enforcement, including working with the City Council on the Confluence Project, a public-private-university partnership for a performing arts center in downtown Eau Claire. The center is set to open in the coming months.

Postlewaite said he worked on several campaigns, including as a field coordinator for Russ Feingold's successful 1992 U.S. Senate campaign, and has served as a behind-the-scenes resource for individuals interested in running for office since.

And Emerson highlighted her five years at Fierce Freedom, an anti-human

trafficking organization, where she lobbied the state Capitol and got seven bills passed. That experience helping write legislation and establishing relationships with legislators, she said, gives her a leg up on her opponents.

One of the candidates also emphasized the historic nature of his bid. Vue, who was born in Laos, would be the first Hmong state rep, should he win election.

"There is an open seat, and there's time for me to run for the state Assembly to diversify representation in Madison," he said.

On other issues:

*The four said it's unlikely they'd support the so-called "constitutional carry" bill if it comes back around next session and they're in the Legislature.

The bill would allow someone to carry a concealed weapon without first obtaining a permit or training.

While all the candidates said they're in favor of firearm training, Emerson and Larsen said gun owners should have not just marksmanship training but lessons on the appropriate time to use force.

"If somebody wants to carry a concealed weapon, then they should have the training, they should have annual training, and not just marksmanship," Larsen said. "They've got to understand what the use of force really means and when it's justified and when it's not."

*The candidates also said they would all prefer to bolster alternative sentencing options in the state rather than building a new prison to reduce the state's inmate population and address overcrowding issues.

"I wouldn't be opposed to building a new prison. But if the answer is to just keep filling them up, I don't see the logic in that," Postlewaite said.

Larsen, meanwhile, called the two-decades old truth-in-sentencing law a "mistake," adding the state "shouldn't be using our prisons just to lock (individuals) away."

The law requires offenders to serve every day of their sentence, while largely eliminating parole and weakening early release.

*And the four are mixed over the five-year UW System tuition freeze, which lawmakers voted to continue in the most recent budget.

While they all emphasized the need to invest more money into the System, they were largely non-committal over the future of the freeze.

Postlewaite, the UW Stout professor, said he doesn't think tuition should be capped anymore, noting he has "seen the impacts" of the freeze and the state's funding decisions in the classroom.

"I don't think we should keep the tuition freeze going any longer," he said. "I think it's had its impact. It's done what it was supposed to do, what the Legislature wanted it to do, to cut the fat, so to speak. So I think it's about time to up the funding to our schools so they can keep up with the needs of modern day technology and the needs the students have to graduate and get good jobs."

Vue, meanwhile, said he'd like to see the freeze continue, while Larsen said he'd potentially support keeping the freeze.

Emerson said she wants to increase funding to the UW System, and would only be open to getting rid of the freeze "if we could use it as a bargaining chip to get more government spending."

Hear Postlewaite's interview:

<https://soundcloud.com/wispolitics/180711postlewaiteinterview/s-Wd1Hf>

Emerson's:

<https://soundcloud.com/wispolitics/180710emersoninterview/s-nEtcV>

Larsen's:

<https://soundcloud.com/wispolitics/180710larseninterview/s-uaccc>

Vue's:

<https://soundcloud.com/wispolitics/180710vueinterview/s-8pfwm>