

Bill Kaplan: Better Wisconsin roads require higher gas tax

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TRIP, a national transportation group, found “that 31 percent of Wisconsin’s major locally and state-maintained roads are in poor condition and 19 percent are in mediocre condition. ... Driving on rough roads costs the state’s drivers \$3.1 billion annually in extra vehicle operating costs, or an average of \$747 per driver, including accelerated vehicle depreciation, additional repair costs, and increased fuel consumption and tire wear.” These problems are statewide, in both rural and urban areas, including Eau Claire, Green Bay–Appleton–Oshkosh, Madison, Milwaukee and Wausau (TRIP).

The state economy requires a well-built and maintained road system — for businesses, farmers, manufacturing workers and daily commuters. And, a good state transportation system will attract out-of-state companies to move to Wisconsin. Moreover, “(t)he design, construction and maintenance of transportation infrastructure in Wisconsin supports more than 64,000 full-time jobs across all sectors of the state economy” (TRIP). Other states get this.

“27 states have raised or reformed their gas taxes since 2013” (Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy). This included many GOP-led states such as Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Nebraska and South Dakota. But Wisconsin’s gas tax has not increased since 2006. Former GOP Governor Scott Walker and the GOP-led legislature refused to raise the state gas tax to pay for needed road construction and maintenance.

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Former Wisconsin Democratic state Senator Tim Cullen wrote: “he (Walker) sticks to his philosophy of no tax increases for any reason His insistence on governing by philosophy and not common sense has led to delaying much needed road and bridge improvements that people of all political persuasions realize are needed. He asked his own Secretary of Transportation to prepare a list of funding recommendations. He prepared one and the governor rejected all of them” (Ringside Seat).

However, many Republicans don’t have their heads in the sand, including the aforementioned GOP-led states that increased state gas taxes. Moreover, GOP President Ronald Reagan raised the federal gas tax in 1983, the first increase in 23 years. Reagan said: “After weighing all of the considerations, I have decided that we should move forward now with a program to repair the nation’s major highways and bridges.” And, for the first time the federal gas tax was also used to fund mass transit programs.

Former Wisconsin GOP Governor Tommy Thompson gets it. He called for bipartisan support to raise the state gas tax: “Let’s face it — gas taxes have not been raised for a long time” (since 2006 - Wisconsin and 1993 - U.S.). Thompson wants Democratic Governor Tony Evers and GOP legislators to “sit down and reach a compromise”. Evers’s budget proposed an 8 cents per gallon increase, in line with many GOP-led states. Evers said voters “wanted to fix the roads. ... and we can’t build roads or fix roads without revenue”. GOP legislators said no. But borrowing will lead to debt and budget cuts to misery. Time for Evers and legislators to sit down at the bargaining table, e.g., combining a gas tax hike with transportation-related fees.

-Kaplan wrote a guest column from Washington, D.C. for the Wisconsin State Journal from 1995 - 2009.