

EDITORIAL: We must fix our country's crumbling roads

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By The Bee Editorial Board

A Fresno public works department team patches potholes on Van Ness Avenue.

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Perhaps averting another standoff with Democrats, the Republican-controlled U.S. House of Representatives took a small step earlier this week by allocating an additional \$10 billion to continue to pay for freeway projects nationwide.



The stopgap legislation by Rep. Bill Camp, a Michigan Republican, seeks to ensure that for 10 months, until next May, California and other states receive their fair share of federal funds for road projects.

But the method used to generate the additional funding is alarming. To conjure the \$10 billion, Congress is tapping supposed savings from pension payments and a customs fee. This is really just smoke and mirrors. These "savings" supplement money generated by the federal gasoline tax. The Highway Trust Fund generated \$50 billion for use on roads and mass transit in 2013.

Once again, Congress is failing to confront the fundamental problem that gasoline tax revenue doesn't cover the cost of repairing and maintaining roads and freeways.

The federal gasoline tax, 18.4 cents per gallon, has not been raised since 1993. California's gasoline tax, also 18 cents, dates to the early 1990s, too, while a second state tax of 18 cents per gallon is a creature of a more recent budget deal.

It's simply not enough, as anyone who braves the rutted wilds of Highway 99 between Sacramento and Bakersfield can attest.

A White House report this week broke down the average annual consumer cost of bad roads. Californians' cost is the highest, no surprise to any California motorist.

The report estimated that bad roads cost Los Angeles-Orange County motorists \$832 a year in added maintenance costs, the most of any region in the nation. San Francisco-Oakland was third worst, at \$782. Sacramento's added repair costs ranked 12th worst, at \$658 a year.

Fresno motorists fare better, as The Bee's Tim Sheehan reported last October. While 25% of Fresno roadways are considered poor and 31% are rated mediocre, drivers in our city pay an added average of \$456 per year because of bad roads. The national average is \$377 per driver.

Camp's legislation, HR 5021, zipped through the House on a bipartisan vote of 367-55, and heads to the Senate, where it is expected to be approved. Three Californians voted against it, including outgoing Rep. George Miller, D-Martinez; Scott Peters, D- San Diego; and Tom McClintock, R-Elk Grove.

In an emailed statement, McClintock said through his press secretary that the Highway Trust Fund was

supposed to be a users pay system; the more miles you drive and the more gas you use, the more highway taxes you pay.

But McClintock said Camp's bill "uses 10 years of savings projected from 'pension smoothing' to prop up the fund this year (\$6.4 billion) and extends the customs user fee by one year in 2023 to claim savings in 2014 (\$3.5 billion). Both are illusory."

McClintock is rightly critical of the bogus funding. He also contends the underlying problem is that freeway maintenance money is diverted. We disagree with the congressman on that point. The real problem is that the tax mechanism based on the number of gallons consumed is outdated.

Plug-ins, hybrids and other high-mileage cars are important for the environment. But as the number of gallons consumed per mile falls, the per-gallon gas tax revenue declines. Any solution must ensure that all users pay their fair share for freeways and transportation-related projects.

The Obama Administration has urged more public-private partnerships and toll roads. Tolls cost poor people proportionately more of their earnings and traditionally have been anathema to Californians. Legislation by state Sen. Mark DeSaulnier, D-Concord, would charge motorists based on the number of miles they travel. That measure, Senate Bill 1077, deserves serious consideration when lawmakers return next month.

Forward-thinking lawmakers here and in Washington, D.C., need to find ways to fix crumbling roads. Swiping \$10 billion from supposed pension savings and a customs fee is hardly a sustainable way to fill the nation's potholes.

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