

Opinion: Fixing California's roads will be tough chore

By Dan Walters

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Gov. Jerry Brown has issued two clarion calls for actions that would affect what tens of millions of Californians do every day – drive their cars – but there may be a conflict between the two.

At one point in his inaugural/State of the State address to the Legislature, Brown called for finding money to pay for an estimated \$59 billion in “needed upkeep and maintenance” on the state’s highways.

“Each year, we fall further and further behind, and we must do something about it,” Brown said.

State highway officials have been beating the drums about the maintenance shortfall for years, to no avail.

California’s once-awesome highway system, largely built during the three decades after World War II, is pounded by more than 300 billion vehicle-miles of travel each year and is decaying rapidly.

The problem is actually much larger than \$59 billion in deferred maintenance because it does, as Brown says, get worse every year.

Looking ahead, we should be spending at least \$100 billion more on maintenance, repair and reconstruction over the next decade.

Fixing the highways should be a higher priority than building Brown’s pet bullet train project which, by the state’s own numbers, would reduce automotive traffic by no more than 1 percent.

Brown didn’t propose how to raise more highway money. Presumably it would be some form of user fee or tax.

Later in his speech, Brown revealed his other automotive priority, to “reduce today’s petroleum use in cars and trucks by 50 percent” in the next 15 years to cut down on carbon emissions.

The question thus arises: How would the state raise the tens of billions of dollars needed to fix the state’s highways if it is – somehow – sharply reducing use of the fuel on which highway taxes are levied?

The answer, presumably, would be to supplant or supplement the gas tax with some kind of levy based on mileage.

The gas tax, which hasn’t changed in two decades, is clearly antiquated. As the fuel efficiency of cars has increased over the years, its revenues have flattened. Drivers of electric cars don’t pay it, and their numbers would increase dramatically under the state’s plans to lower fuel use by 50 percent.

Last year, Brown signed a bill creating an administrative task force to recommend a method for shifting to a mileage-based transportation tax system.

As logical as a mileage-based tax would be, it’s also a very hard sell politically, especially since it would presumably increase overall revenues to pay for the highway backlog.

Not only would anti-tax politicians and groups be leery, but owners of electric and hybrid cars, who are largely exempt from highway user taxes now, might mount resistance to any effort that makes them pay the same mileage fees as those who drive gas-guzzling SUVs.

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