

Brown seeks money for fixing roads as gas tax value plunges

By FENIT NIRAPPIL



FILE - In this April 21, 2014 file photo drivers using the onramp to eastbound Highway 50 pass a sign showing where to get information about the pending work on the freeway in Sacramento, Calif. Gov. Jerry Brown wants to slash gasoline consumption in half by 2030, which would also drain the gas tax revenue used to repave roads and fix potholes. The state's 10-year repairs backlog has already ballooned to \$59 billion as more electrical and fuel-efficient vehicles hit the road. RICH PEDRONCELLI, FILE — AP Photo

SACRAMENTO, Calif. — California lawmakers are looking at new ways to pay for crumbling roads, bridges and highways as the traditional repair fund from gasoline taxes dries up.

Revenue from gasoline taxes have been sliding as more fuel-efficient and electric cars hit aging roads. That's contributing to an annual \$5.9 billion backlog in state highway repairs.

Gov. Jerry Brown's administration is studying whether to tax drivers by miles traveled instead of gas guzzled. Changing the system could take more than five years, and lawmakers are calling for more money to repave roads and fill potholes in the meantime.

They are considering a dollar-a-week fee on most drivers, a temporary gas tax hike, re-directing money used to pay off state debt back to road projects and converting carpool lanes into paid toll ways.

Lawmakers in Congress and statehouses across the nation are grappling with transportation funding shortfalls. In California, Brown's vision for an eco-friendly fleet using half as much gasoline by 2030 is clashing with how the state pays for infrastructure.

"We have not had in the last 25 years a revenue source in transportation that is stable, ongoing and commensurate with our needs," said Brian Kelly, Brown's top transportation aide. "We have fallen further and further behind."

Road maintenance is primarily funded by an 18-cent a gallon gasoline tax, which hasn't increased since 1994.

Collections fell from \$2.87 billion in 2003 to \$2.62 billion in 2013. Drivers pay even more in taxes at the pump for local, federal and new state projects.

State officials say they need more money each year because of the rising costs of fixing roads. About 16 percent of the highways were in poor condition in 2013, according to the California Department of Transportation.

"We are looking at getting revenue in place now to stem the blood flow because our roads are falling apart before our eyes," said Jim Earp, director of the California Alliance for Jobs, which represents construction companies and trade unions.

Hiking taxes and fees requires two-thirds support from the Legislature, including Republicans. Brown in his inaugural address called on both parties to come together on transportation funding, as they did when they developed a \$7.5 billion water plan last year.

Assembly Speaker Toni Atkins, D-San Diego, on Wednesday announced legislation to raise an additional \$2 billion a year for transportation, including an annual \$52 fee for most drivers. While the details aren't worked out, Atkins said the fee could be charged as part of insurance plans and vehicle registration.

Electrical vehicle drivers who don't pay gas taxes and truckers could also pay more.

Assembly Republican Leader Kristin Olsen, R-Modesto, says she's not opposed to new revenue and charging people who don't pay for road repair, but changes should be balanced with cuts in spending and other taxes. Republicans have blasted the California Department of Transportation for having too many employees and want to redirect money from the \$68 billion bullet train project, a personal priority of Brown's.

Brown said last month he would not "pre-empt the discussions" by publicly supporting legislative proposals.

Ellen Hanak, a senior fellow with the Public Policy Institute of California, says the key to a successful compromise is pressure from drivers and businesses fed up with poor road conditions.

"Like water, these are not red and blue issues; people care about transportation in red and blue and purple places," Hanak said. "A basic funding gap is something that affects everybody."

Transportation industry groups took steps to place a vehicle license fee hike for infrastructure on the November 2014 ballot, but abandoned it after finding little support. Earp, the leader of the construction group, says outside organizations may try to take a funding measure to voters in 2016 if the Legislature is unable to pass a deal.

Outside of the capitol, a committee of government and industry officials is looking at replacing the gas tax with a mileage fee. The idea is having drivers pay their share of wear-and-tear on roads, similar to paying water bills by the meter instead of flat rates.

Owners of electrical and hybrid vehicles are avoiding the burden of fixing roads, some transportation observers say.

"It's the more affluent people driving these vehicles getting out of paying their fair share," said Bill Higgins, executive director of the California Association of Councils of Government.

The tricky part is how to measure road use. Instead of simple odometer readings, many road use charge proposals include GPS devices that raise concerns about the government tracking driver habits.

"Your lives are encoded rather reliably in what you do in your car," said Lee Tien, an attorney with the Electronic Frontier Foundation who is pushing for non-GPS alternatives on the road usage charge committee.

California hasn't committed to such a tax, which Oregon is testing with 5,000 volunteers this summer. California officials are due to set up a pilot program and report findings to the Legislature by 2018, setting the stage for a larger

battle over whether to make the shift.

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