

How about honesty and transparency on road fees?

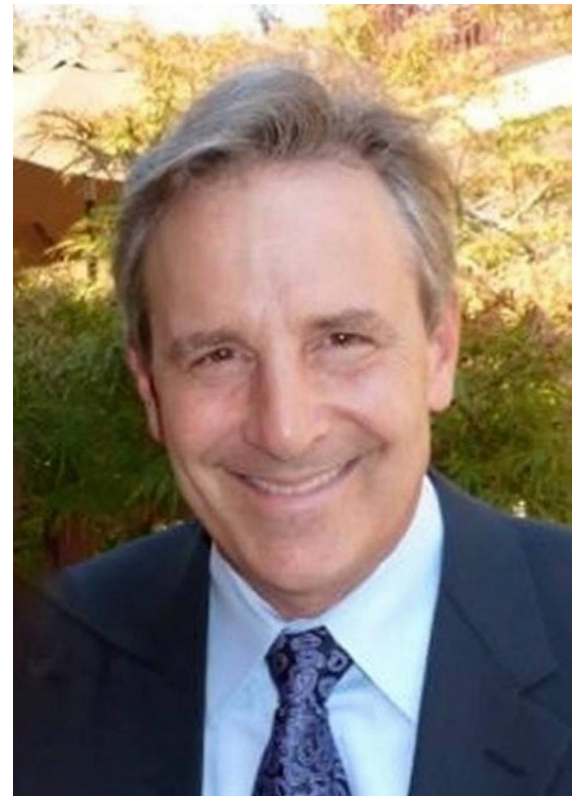
By Bruce Maiman Special to The Bee

She gets credit for trying, but Assembly Speaker Toni Atkins' idea for funding road repair and maintenance with \$1.8 billion in annual fees on California drivers is another example of "yeah, but" legislation and a reminder of how government is often its own worst enemy.

According to the proposal, motorists would pay \$52 annually per vehicle. Yeah, a dollar a week sounds doable, but:

- Someone will demand exemptions for lower-income Californians.
- What about consumers with two cars – a pickup truck used only for occasional hauling, the weekend off-road SUV driver, or the guy with a vintage model that only gets a Sunday spin? Do they have to pay twice even though they're driving only one vehicle at a time?

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- Should the elderly be exempted since they drive less frequently? Should alternative vehicle owners pay more since they pay less in fuel taxes?

The biggest "yeah, but," however, will come from taxpayers who see a high-speed rail project pitched at \$10 billion now projected to cost \$68 billion and starting in a part of the state where very few will use it. Taxpayers also see a troubled \$1.5 billion bridge that's now \$6.5 billion and counting, while the California Department of Transportation

executive who oversaw the project is about to retire with full benefits, a disgraceful track record of waste and not even a slap on the wrist.

Interestingly, the [Legislative Analyst's Office reported last year](#) that Caltrans is overstaffed by 3,500 employees, costing taxpayers \$500 million that might otherwise be directed toward fixing roads.

Laughably, at the height of the Bay Bridge boondoggle, the state also spent \$270,000 for a report ordered by Gov. Jerry Brown concluding that “Caltrans is in need of both modernization and organizational culture change” – as if we didn't know – while not once mentioning the eastern span.

There's more. [Atkins proposes](#) that only \$800 million of the estimated \$1.8 billion in driver fees go directly to road improvements. The rest would go to pay debt service on past state transportation bonds, which are currently being paid by truck weight fees.

Wait a minute. You're not even going to spend the majority of the fee on what you say it's for because you redirected trucking weight fees from their original purpose, road maintenance, to pay bond debts? We're now robbing Peter to pay Paul so he can repay Peter?

We hear it often: Fuel efficiency and state incentives for hybrid or electric vehicles have dramatically reduced gas tax revenue despite more cars on the road today than there were 18 years ago, the last time fuel taxes were raised. By 2030, as much as half of traditional fuel tax revenue could be lost to the unintended consequences of well-intended regulation.

Lawmakers are pondering pay-by-the-mile usage, which Oregon and Washington state are currently testing; raising fuel taxes, an idea the California Trucking Association supports; and now, the Atkins proposal.

Before any of that, I would suggest a good-faith olive branch – sunshine. Provide a spreadsheet of every tax dollar designated for our roads. Put some of those 3,500 Caltrans workers on it. Show where the money went and why through an ongoing audit taxpayers can readily access. Even show how a given project will save on commute times or delivery times for truckers.

Don't tell me it can't be done. Each week, the Federal Reserve, which is vigorously reviewed by both government and private sector auditors, releases its balance sheet and provides an interactive guide for further explanation.

Then, most important, punish bureaucrats who waste tax dollars and those who try to cover up that neglect. How about those people lose a third of their pension benefits?

Make those efforts, lawmakers, and maybe you'll build more trust. The real problem here isn't paying taxes and fees, it's who gets the money. While some of your ideas might sound great, you stink at executing them. Even worse, as much as they say you really care, your actions say you really don't.

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