

Opinion: Republicans' road fund complaints are dead wrong

By Dan Walters

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Republican leader Bob Huff and other GOP senators have been beating the drums lately about a seemingly nefarious diversion of a billion dollars a year from badly needed highway construction and maintenance projects.

Huff and anti-tax groups staged a news conference Monday at a busy freeway interchange in Diamond Bar to demand that the diversion of transportation funds into the state general fund be halted.

They also touted a constitutional amendment that he and other Republicans have introduced to stop it.

"Our roads are in terrible shape," Huff said. "California has more than 175,000 miles of public roads, and the Department of Finance says those roads need about \$56 billion worth of maintenance."

Yes, our roads are in terrible shape, with pavement conditions the worst, or nearly so, of any state, according to the Federal Highway Administration.

And yes, we need to spend more money to repair our crumbling highways and relieve the nation's worst traffic congestion.

But the complaints from Huff, et al., about the diversion are dead wrong, and they should know it because it's spelled out plainly in the state budget.

That money is, in fact, being spent on transportation, servicing some \$20 billion in voter-approved transportation construction bonds that have been issued in recent years.

Former Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger championed the 2006 general obligation bond issue, which was to be repaid from the state general fund, not dedicated gasoline taxes or other transportation revenues.

It was an expedient error of political judgment. Transportation costs should be paid by transportation users.

A few years later, with the state budget drowning in red ink, Schwarzenegger and the Legislature moved to correct the error and shift bond service, about a billion dollars a year, to gasoline taxes.

However, in 2010, voters adopted Proposition 22, which had the effect of making such a diversion illegal, so Schwarzenegger's successor, Jerry Brown, and legislators did an end run, shifting repayment of transportation bonds to truck weight fees.

That shift continues, and it's still the right thing to do.

It's not difficult to understand why Huff is making a big fuss. He's termed out of the Legislature next year and is running for Los Angeles County supervisor, hoping to gain traction with voters (and drivers) who must contend with nightmarish traffic each day.

There is, however, a serious downside to the fiction that we can fix the state's deteriorating roadways without raising taxes simply by ending the diversion of the truck weight fee. It undercuts the reality that California needs an entirely new system of financing much-needed transportation work that probably would include a tax increase of some kind, either a gas tax hike or a mileage-based alternative.

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