

Opinion: Our roads are just shameful

By Dan Walters

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There was a time when California was teaching the world how to build first-class highway systems.

Our highway engineers were loaned to other nations eager to emulate California's network of highways and freeways.

Today, California's state highways and local streets and roads are – or should be – a civic embarrassment, ranking at or near the bottom in state-to-state quality comparisons.

Although California motorists pay the second highest fuel taxes in the nation, we sit near the bottom in maintenance spending per mile of roadway and, therefore, at or near the bottom in congestion and pavement conditions.

As anyone who drives on California's streets, roads and highways could attest, they are in lousy condition – in some cases literally disintegrating under the pounding of 330 billion vehicle-miles of travel each year.

The California Transportation Commission, in its most recent [“statewide transportation system needs assessment,”](#) says California should spend \$538.1 billion on state and local transportation improvements and maintenance in the ensuing decade, but can count on having less than half that amount.

Gov. Jerry Brown says it's time to act on “permanent and sustainable funding” for highways.

“The state's current fuel excise tax is sufficient to fund only \$2.3 billion of work – leaving \$5.7 billion in unfunded repairs each year,” Brown said this week as he called a special legislative session to deal with the shortfall.

It's about time – especially since the shameful decline of our highways began during his first governorship, when he was openly disdainful of automotive travel.

But what should he and the Legislature do?

Simply hiking the state gas tax would be the simplest option. It would have to rise by a least 20 cents a gallon to cover the shortfall Brown cites, but that wouldn't even begin to cover the larger deficit outlined by the transportation commission, which is about \$25 billion a year.

Even a 20-cent gas tax boost would be opposed by anti-tax groups and would require at least some Republican votes in the Legislature. It also would be unfair since drivers of increasingly popular electric and hybrid cars would pay little or nothing.

Some have proposed a new per-mile levy, similar to one being tested in Oregon. A penny a mile would raise \$3 billion-plus a year, but taking fuel consumption out of the tax equation, some critics say, unfairly benefits drivers of gas guzzlers. And there are knotty privacy issues in tracking cars' mileage.

Whichever path is followed, the Legislature should begin by explaining, or demanding others to explain, why our fuel taxes are so high now but our spending on vital maintenance is so low.

Without some reasonable explanation, and guarantees that new roadway money won't be squandered, drivers will be rightfully reluctant to pay more, no matter how it would be imposed.