

Darius Assemi: Here's how to fix California's roads, bridges and highways

By Darius Assemi

The facts are sobering: Deteriorating roads cost Californians \$44 billion a year in repairs, accidents, time and fuel – tantamount to a hidden tax. California's state highway maintenance funding has an annual shortfall of \$5.7 billion and deferred repair costs exceeding \$57 billion. A recent example of the dangers of deferred maintenance is the I-10 Bridge collapse July 19, after heavy rainfall. Thankfully no one was hurt – this time. We cannot wait for lives to be lost before we act.

There are two main reasons for the backlog of highway repairs: the diminished purchasing power of the gas tax, which has not been raised since 1990, and the proliferation of fuel-efficient and electric cars. This has led to lower gas tax revenue in real dollars, making funding a well-maintained highway infrastructure virtually impossible. Further exacerbating our funding issue will be the increasing use of electric buses and semi-trucks. While these cleaner vehicles offer immense benefit to our environment, their impact on gas tax revenue cannot be overlooked.

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In the past two decades, our state has added 9 million new residents. We have over 25 million licensed drivers with more than 4 million new licenses issued between 2010 and 2014. Californians drive nearly 900 million miles every day, the equivalent of 36,000 trips around the earth, consuming more than 15 billion gallons of gasoline annually.

As a taxpayer, I recognize we are one of the highest taxed states, but this column is not about our state's tax policy. Rather, it is about solutions for California's outdated and ailing transportation infrastructure.

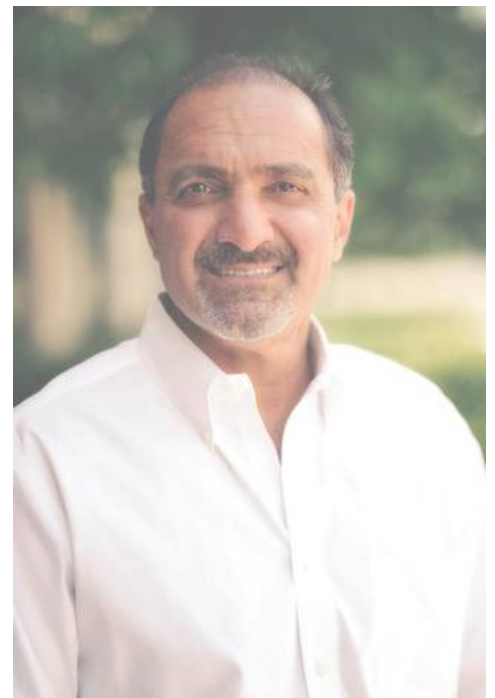
Many ideas are being discussed to remedy the funding deficit for our roads: increasing the gas tax to where it would have been had inflation been taken into account, indexing the gas tax to inflation, and increasing the vehicle licensing fee. While none of these options are popular, in the near term they offer a temporary fix for funding road repairs.

In the long run, we must evaluate a usage-based fee that replaces, not augments, the gas tax. My colleague on the California Transportation Commission, James Madaffer, has taken the lead on exploring a usage-based vehicle miles traveled system that will adequately finance our transportation needs.

Concurrent – and inextricably linked – with development of new revenues, we must adopt reform and accountability measures that include the following:

First, we must increase accountability in transportation funding. Taxpayers need to have confidence that Caltrans and other transportation agencies are streamlined organizations that responsibly manage their budgets. Caltrans should have work performance and productivity comparable to, if not better than, any private sector business, particularly since they are funded by hardworking Californians.

Caltrans also needs to implement a more efficient staffing model. While Caltrans has reduced its project delivery workforce by nearly 25% since 2007, the need for more productivity is a must.



Information on the engineering and building process for Caltrans projects can be viewed at the [Department of Transportation website](http://www.dot.ca.gov), www.dot.ca.gov. To promote further transparency and accountability, taxpayers should be able to access project statuses with the same ease that we can track deliveries of packages and pizzas.

Second, years ago, the legislature passed a bill which prohibited the spending of gas tax revenue for non-transportation purposes. Unfortunately, the state got around that law by “borrowing” those revenues with a promise to repay them. Credit is due to Gov. Brown, who has directed that these loans, which exceed \$1 billion, be repaid. This type of borrowing must end and gas taxes must be used only for construction, management and maintenance of our highways.

Third, we must maximize the value of transportation funds. For example, construction of a road that does not change the existing right-of-way should not require costly and time-consuming analysis under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). If professional sports venues in Sacramento and San Francisco can be exempted from CEQA, thoroughly vetted infrastructure improvements should be as well. We should also pursue more design-build projects, allowing work to be completed in less time, at reduced expense, and with less red tape.

Finally, we must develop a long-term funding strategy that will keep up with the unique needs of our state, and allow for the expansion and improvement of our transportation system. The California of the future will require a robust, multi-modal transportation system, composed of automobiles, autonomous vehicles, mass transit and commercial traffic, necessitating the transition from a fuel-consumption tax to a usage-based model.

Gov. Brown recently convened a special session of the legislature to discuss our transportation challenges. Addressing these issues is never easy, but California must have a 21st century transportation system if we want a robust, 21st century economy.

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