

Editorial: Fixing California roads and highways should top legislators' agenda

By The Bee Editorial Board

California lawmakers will vote to cut gasoline use by 50 percent – or not.

They'll impose new taxes on cigarettes and health care plans, and increase payments to doctors and others who care for poor people and developmentally disabled people – or they won't.

Senate President Pro Tem Kevin de León's Senate Bill 350 would reduce greenhouse gas emissions by forcing huge reductions in gasoline use – and thus gas tax collections. The oil industry is spending millions on an ad campaign warning that SB 350 would lead to gasoline rationing. Special to The Bee

Lawmakers and lobbyists have returned to the Capitol for a final month of horse-trading and buttonholing. Whether the big deals come together is unclear. But some should, including one to pay for better roads and highways.

Highway funding is, however, a knotty problem. Because it would involve some form of tax increase on gasoline consumption and driving, lawmakers must approve any deal by a two-thirds margin. That means Republicans will matter.

Although Republicans always are hesitant to raise taxes, there are bargaining chips. One could involve a proposal by freshman Sen. John Moorlach, an anti-tax hawk from Orange County, to reduce the size of Caltrans. Democrats generally are unwilling to pare back the public employee workforce in any significant way.

A related issue involves Senate President Pro Tem Kevin de León's Senate Bill 350 to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by forcing huge reductions in gasoline use – and thus gas tax collections. The oil industry is spending millions on an ad campaign warning that SB 350 would lead to gasoline rationing.

We support de León's efforts to curb greenhouse gas and reduce reliance on petroleum, but questions remain about how the state would attain the goals without imposing undue costs on lower-income Californians.

Legislators also will spend time negotiating how to best spend the \$2 billion-plus generated by California's cap-and-trade program, which imposes fees on polluters, including motorists, to offset their emissions.

All of the above would be plenty to keep legislators busy. But they will need to multitask. Doctors and hospitals are angling for increases in payments to care for Medi-Cal patients, as are workers who care for developmentally disabled people. Where that money would come from is not clear.

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A pressing but arcane issue involves how to impose a managed care organization tax to help fund health care for poor people. The federal government has told the state that its method of taxing plans failed to comply with federal law.

If the tax issue is not resolved, there would be a \$1 billion-plus hole in next year's budget. Better to resolve the tax question this year.

There's still more: school funding, affordable housing, marijuana regulation, and maybe an Indian gambling compact or two. And there will be campaign money to raise.

The Senate has imposed a fundraising moratorium on its members for the final month. Assembly members, however, will cast pivotal votes on bills, and scurry to restaurants and bars to raise money from people affected by those votes. The unseemly practice ought to end.