

Assembly Speaker Atkins pitches fix for state's crumbling roads and bridges

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Assembly Speaker Toni Atkins on Friday visited Fresno and along with representatives of Gov. Jerry Brown's administration made a case for new taxes or fees to repair the state's crumbling roads and bridges.

A special session called by Brown to address California's deteriorating transportation network is underway, but to date has yet to produce any results. Brown says the current fuel tax revenue generates \$2.3 billion annually, but that leaves \$5.7 billion in unfunded repairs each year.

Now, Atkins and Brian Kelly, Brown's transportation secretary, are on a self-described "road show" to pitch the public on supporting new taxes or fees to fund road improvements.

"I think the objective is to try to get done what hasn't been done," Kelly told The Fresno Bee's editorial board. "That is, we need a new dedicated, stable source of revenue for transportation improvements that will be lasting, ongoing, user-based and will allow us to make the investments in transportation that, candidly, we haven't (made) the last decade and a half or longer."

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Details, however, are sketchy as Democratic leadership looks for something that can pass the state Legislature. Is it an increase in the fuel tax? Tying fuel taxes to the Consumer Price Index? Increasing the diesel fuel tax? Instituting an annual fee for drivers? Tying a fee to miles driven? Whatever the case, Atkins, Kelly and Darius Assemi of Fresno, the Granville Homes president and California Transportation Commission member, said something must be done: Californians are using less gasoline because of increased fuel efficiency at the same time miles driven are increasing.

The challenge is that any new tax requires a two-thirds majority vote in the state Senate and state Assembly. That means every Democrat would have to support a proposal – not a given at all – as well as a few Republicans.

That's why "everything needs to be on the table," Atkins, D-San Diego, said at a public gathering of state and local elected officials, labor and business leaders in Fresno following the editorial board meeting.

Atkins and Assembly Appropriations Committee chairman Jimmy Gomez, D-Los Angeles, pointed to last year's water bond proposal, cobbled together by both Democrats and Republicans. "I think there's some room for optimism," Atkins said of her hopes for bipartisanship on transportation funding.

It seems Republicans don't share that optimism.

Assemblyman Jim Patterson, R-Fresno, said Republicans have their own ideas for coping with California's deteriorating pavement – and the central focus is on what Republicans describe as Caltrans' "bloated bureaucracy."

"What's frustrating is that the Democrats and the governor have said no to every single one," Patterson said of GOP suggestions. He added that he was not notified of Friday's Fresno roundtable until a few days ago.

“That just demonstrates to me that there really isn’t an interest in an alternative voice,” he said.

In addition to saving an estimated \$500 million in Caltrans’ budget by paring about 3,500 employees that Patterson said the state Legislative Analyst identified as unnecessary, “there is over \$1 billion every year taken from truck weight fees that is being swept from transportation to the state’s general fund.”

He added that he also believes that Caltrans, rather than doing the bulk of its engineering and construction in house, should be forced to bid projects out to save money on highway and transportation projects. In total, Republicans say there is \$6 billion or so that could be found in existing funds.

California has a fuel-efficiency goal of 54.5 miles per gallon for new cars sold in the state by 2025. That target, established with a rising number of gas-sipping hybrid vehicles and all-electric vehicles in mind, is great for air pollution concerns. But for road maintenance, it means less money being generated in fuel taxes for every vehicle mile driven.

At 18 cents per gallon, California’s fuel taxes – which haven’t been adjusted in 25 years – aren’t generating enough money to keep up with maintenance on the state’s 175,499 miles of roadways.

Assemi said something has to be done. In less than a decade, he said, a majority of the state’s transportation could be electrified, which would mean plummeting fuel tax revenue at the same time road repair – not to mention new road construction or road widening – is still needed.

“The world is changing,” he said. “We have to have a new mechanism for getting revenue.”

At the subsequent news conference, Assemi added that, “none of us wants to pay more. But we haven’t been paying our share for two decades.”

Leaders recognize there is trust to rebuild, both in the Capitol and in the public, after repeated state raids of transportation money for other uses. “We have to make sure the money we invest goes where we said it will,” Gomez said.

And in a Legislature dominated in numbers by the San Francisco Bay Area and Southern California, there is concern about the San Joaquin Valley getting short shrift in any new funding formulas that emerge.

Officials, including Caltrans Director Malcolm Dougherty, said this region wouldn’t be forgotten. Specifically mentioned was Highway 99, the Valley’s main thoroughfare and a road badly in need of even more improvements and widening. Dougherty said other areas that need help are fire-ravaged areas including the Sierra Nevada east of Fresno, where landslides could block roads and severely hamper traffic for both locals and tourists.

Gomez said he believes there is a change of attitude, especially among newer members in the Legislature, that veers away from the parochialism that has, in some instances, left the Valley behind in infrastructure spending.

“We are one state,” he said. “We are working on changing everyone’s mentality in negotiations on the big issues.”