

Columbus Dispatch

Thursday, January 17, 2019

Editorial: Time to find ways to meet Ohio's road, transit needs

Among the first orders of business for Gov. Mike DeWine and the 133rd Ohio General Assembly will be setting a new two-year transportation budget. For a good start, they should consider a plan by a statewide coalition to get a shriveling transportation capital program back on track. Fix Our Roads Ohio, a group including county governments, chambers of commerce, regional planning bodies and transportation organizations, is sounding the alarm: Even as Ohio's roads, bridges and transit systems become more congested and in need of repair, transportation funding is about to take a dive.

[The group's report](#) offers options for a solution: a gasoline-tax hike; an annual fee for alternative-fuel vehicles; more reliable funding for public transit; and yet-undiscovered technologies for spreading the cost of road wear and tear. Most likely, getting Ohio's transportation network in shape for the future is going to require all of the above.

The funding crunch comes in part because the \$1.5 billion windfall that former Gov. John Kasich created for roadwork by selling bonds backed by revenue from the Ohio Turnpike runs out at the end of June.

DeWine won't have the option of selling more turnpike bonds unless he persuades the Turnpike Commission to raise fares. Without some new funding source, capital spending for roads and transit in the coming two-year budget is projected to drop to \$1.7 billion in 2020 and 2021. That's a 29 percent drop from the 2014 peak, and it has transportation officials worried.

There's also the fact that the state gasoline tax, at 28 cents per gallon, hasn't been raised since 2005, when the last 2-cent increment of a 6-cent increase approved in 2002 went into effect.

Back then, said Dean Ringle, former Franklin County engineer and now executive director of the County Engineers Association of Ohio, "Everybody was feeling pretty good," confident the 6-cent increase would provide for road-building needs for a long time.

But inflation had other ideas; the effect of the increase was wiped out in a few years, Ringle said. Later, the turnpike bonds provided a one-time infusion that somewhat masked the shortage of roadwork funds, but it still was looming.

We hope Gov. DeWine and Ohio Department of Transportation officials will be consulting with For Our Roads Ohio and other interested parties as the state transportation budget takes shape in the next few months.

The gasoline tax has the virtue of being a user fee — used only for roadwork and paid only by people who use the roads. Increasing it is appropriate, but it can't be the only long-term solution. Higher-mileage cars and the advent of electric vehicles have cut into gas-tax revenue, and relying on it solely allows electric-vehicle users to avoid paying their share.

Policymakers should consider technologies allowing motorists to be assessed for the miles they drive on Ohio roads, but without creating a record of where they have driven.

Lastly, we hope Ohio's leaders will increase the state's investment in transit. In growing areas like central Ohio, roadway capacity can be increased only so much without turning a vibrant community into a giant freeway. Younger Americans are more interested than earlier generations in public transportation, and supplying more of it is a smarter way to manage the demand to get around.

<https://www.dispatch.com/opinion/20190117/editorial-time-to-find-ways-to-meet-ohios-road-transit-needs>