

Road Runner by Andrea Kelly : With gas cost low, it's a great time to raise tax

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If the government wants to raise the gasoline tax to bring in more funding for roads, now is the time.

It's never popular to raise taxes, which is why the state and federal gasoline taxes have not increased in many years and now no longer keep up with the nation's roadway needs.

The National Commission on Surface Transportation Infrastructure Financing, a congressional panel on transportation funding, is recommending an increase from the current federal rate of 18.4 cents per gallon for regular gasoline to 28.4 cents a gallon. (Diesel fuel is taxed at 24.4 cents per gallon, and the commission wants to raise it by 12 to 15 cents.) Arizona's fuel tax is another 18 cents per gallon.

Transportation systems are crumbling faster than we can maintain them, let alone make efforts to keep up with growth. A quick drive down lots of local streets will show you that.

Unless there's a funding source for these systems, which deteriorate over time, we won't see improvements.

Don't get me wrong — I'm not sure the gas tax is the solution to transportation funding. With more and more emphasis on mass transit and alternative transportation, not to mention alternative fuels and more fuel-efficient vehicles, the goal is to reduce reliance on cars and the fuel that propels them. But even so, we still will need roads.

And even if the gas tax isn't the golden ticket to fixing our transportation woes, some will still back an increase because that's the way we fund transportation infrastructure right now. In some ways, it's easier to try to tweak the current system than introduce a whole new one.

The gasoline tax may not be the future of transportation funding, and I'm not saying it's the best way to go. However, if officials do want to raise it, the time to do that is when gas prices are low.

Now that gas prices are below \$2 per gallon, I think people could be more easily persuaded to pay a little extra, especially with the memory of near-\$4 gas only a few months ago.

Another suggestion for future transportation funding is "use taxes," which would be a toll system. That philosophy ensures everyone who drives on a road pays to use it, and those taxes or fees can be broken down by vehicle weight. Some propose flat taxes for all drivers, no matter how fuel-efficient their vehicles may be.

Then there's the ever-more-common attempt at using sales tax to pay for transportation. We see that here with our half-cent-per-dollar sales tax in Pima County, with the revenues going toward the Regional Transportation Plan for the Tucson metropolitan area.

Sales taxes for transportation often are criticized as unfair because even people who don't leave the house to use local transportation much still have to pay a sales tax for their goods.

I don't think the answer comes from one revenue stream, but I do think those who are pushing for higher gas taxes are doing it at the right time for their argument to gain a little traction.

Road Q

Question: "I have seen several people riding Segways in bike lanes, presumably going to work. Are these legal on Tucson streets? I do not see how a bike could get past them, since they take up the whole lane," Jim Kelly wrote.

Answer: In Tucson, a person on a Segway is considered a pedestrian and must follow pedestrian laws, said Sgt. Tim Beam of the Tucson Police Department's traffic section.

"They have to use a sidewalk when one is provided," Beam said. "If no sidewalk is provided, they may be in the street and going against traffic."

• *Road Runner answers road-related questions in this column on Mondays. Find Road Runner, plus traffic cams and other transportation news, at azstarnet.com/transportation. Send your questions by e-mail to roadrunner@azstarnet.com, or to P.O. Box 26807, Tucson, AZ 85726. Please include your first and last names.* • *Find traffic updates and other transportation news on the Gridlocked blog at: go.azstarnet.com/gridlocked*

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