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EDITORIAL

'Hidden tax' outweighs gas tax

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A pothole forms in this 2015 file photo on Hwy 61, in front of Ashley Missionary Baptist Church, in Dorchester County. (Brad Nettles/Staff)

Senate opponents of a gas tax increase to help pay for road and bridge improvements are once again threatening to undermine a bill to raise money for the long-overdue work. A replay of last year's filibuster is expected, and while a majority of the Senate would likely vote for a plan to raise the gas tax 12-cents a gallon over the next six years, the margin might not be enough to override a gubernatorial veto.

And when Gov. Henry McMaster says that a gas tax increase should be only a "last resort" and that citizens already are taxed enough, it certainly sounds like the prelude to a veto. Given the acknowledged need for road funding, South Carolinians should expect responsible leadership from Mr. McMaster.

The cost of a gas tax hike envisioned by the Senate plan is estimated at an average of $60 a year for state motorists (about 30 percent of the tax is paid by out-of-state drivers). Legislative naysayers should compare that figure to the far higher costs of auto repairs, congestion and safety hazards associated with the inadequacy of state roads and bridges.

An annual report from TRIP, a national transportation research group based in Washington, D.C., puts the price tag for those hidden costs at an incredible $1,850 a year for residents of the Charleston metropolitan area. Statewide the overall cost is assessed at $5.4 billion.

The $1,850 per year total includes the added safety and congestion-related costs imposed by poor road conditions and traffic-clogged highways. But even the safest Charleston area drivers who never travel at peak traffic hours can expect a whopping $452 per year due to "accelerated vehicle depreciation, additional repair costs, increased fuel consumption and tire wear."

In other words, the "hidden tax" of poor roads costs even the best drivers at least seven times as much as increasing the gas tax and about 30 times more when all economic impacts are factored in.

The TRIP report is largely derived from data supplied by the state Department of Transportation to the Federal Highway Administration. The DOT does not contest the findings. Indeed, DOT Secretary Christy Hall said Tuesday, "SCDOT believes the information speaks for itself."

The DOT currently spends about $415 million annually on road repairs and reconstruction, or less than half of what the DOT says is needed to do the work.

The report notes that 29 percent of urban roadways are in poor condition; 35 percent in mediocre condition; 19 percent in fair condition and 17 percent in good addition.

Meanwhile, traffic congestion in the state's five urban areas has increased by 10 percent in the last three years. While road improvements could ease the situation, TRIP also cites the importance of transit improvements.

Problems associated with road conditions are increased traffic-related injury and death, and lower economic growth. Three-fourths of the state's goods are carried by trucks.

"Without adequate funding, South Carolina's transportation system will become increasingly deteriorated and congested, hampering economic growth, safety and quality of life," TRIP director Will Wilkins said.

Some of the Senate opposition to the proposed gas tax increase is based on the demand for additional reform measures to the DOT and the State Infrastructure Bank, including their policy-making boards. Others are simply no-new tax opponents.

The House, incidentally, has approved a 10-cent a gallon gas tax, to be implemented over five years. It would generate $600 million a year.

The TRIP report is a reminder that there are hidden taxes in the legislative opposition to an overdue hike in the gas tax — which was last increased 30 years ago. Based on the latest data, the penny-wise, pound-foolish approach is costing residents substantially more than a gas tax increase. Obstructionists in the Statehouse should heed the findings.