

GAZETTE OPINION

Gazette opinion: Invest 8 cents for Montana highway safety



Montana lawmakers tend to wrestle with the same issues session after session, often patching a problem short-term or kicking tough decisions down the road for another two years. In Congress, budget resolutions may last only weeks, and a “five-year” highway bill is actually funded for only three.

Montana deserves much better than that. In the last weeks of the 2017 Montana Legislature, our lawmakers have the opportunity to approve a long-term fix for state highway safety. House Bill 473, sponsored by Rep. Frank Garner, R-Kalispell, and Sen. Llew Jones, R-Conrad, next needs approval from the Senate Finance and Claims Committee and the full Senate.

Although Jones chairs the finance committee and HB473 passed the House 54-46, we take nothing for granted on this important safety, infrastructure and economic development legislation.

The reasons Montana needs to invest in its transportation safety are painfully obvious:

- Already this year 30 people have died on Montana roads, and our state has the third highest highway fatality rate based on miles traveled among the 50 states.
- More than 900 bridges in Montana are either structurally deficient or obsolete.
- More than 30 percent of all public roads are in poor condition.

- The hazardous conditions of our roads cost Montana motorists an estimated \$800 million a year in repairs, damages and lost time, according to a recent independent assessment.
- The state gas tax hasn’t changed in 24 years; the state law funding city and county roads hasn’t changed in 35 years.

Fortunately, a majority of the Montana House recognized this need and supported the plan to [increase the gas tax by 8 cents](#) per gallon and to use the revenue to improve safety on roads and bridges. A small portion of that money would be used to maintain Montana Highway Patrol staffing levels.

Another portion would be distributed to cities and counties for road projects. The bill as amended provides that local governments would have to furnish \$1 in matching funds for each \$20 in state road funds, and that money would start flowing to cities and counties in the upcoming state fiscal year. The tax increase would take effect July 1 — in the middle of the busy tourist season when more fuel is sold in this state.

When Garner drafted this bill with support from the Montana Infrastructure Coalition, he insisted on two provisions for increased accountability:

First, the bill requires that the Montana Department of Transportation be audited and that the audit be presented to an interim legislative committee.

Second, the bill directs MDOT to report online for the public to view all the projects and spending financed with the gas tax.

Yellowstone County has many miles of rural and urban roads that need work. Surely, our local legislators want safe roads that can handle the high traffic volumes of Montana’s most populous county.

We call on Yellowstone County senators to vote for public safety; support HB473.