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TOP STORY

South Carolina gas tax fight brings out dueling sides at Statehouse

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Ted Pitts, CEO of the South Carolina Chamber of Commerce, speaks in support of pending gas tax legislation that would help finance road and bridge projects throughout the Palmetto State on March 21, 2017. Andrew Brown/Staff

COLUMBIA — The lobbying and public relations campaigns fighting over a proposed gas tax increase in South Carolina are in full swing as the Senate prepares to debate this week which way to go.

Tax policy groups and several members of the state's business community held opposing events in the Statehouse on Tuesday seeking to influence the 46 members of the state Senate their way.

Ted Pitts, CEO of the S.C. Chamber of Commerce, and other supporters of the tax proposal spent the morning advocating for the bill, which could raise

up to \$800 million annually under the most recent Senate version.

The Senate's plan would increase the tax at the pump by 12 cents over the next six years, whereas the version that passed the House would bump the tax by 10 cents over five years.

During the afternoon, Sen. Tom Davis, R-Beaufort, was the headline speaker at a press conference organized by Americans For Prosperity — an anti-tax organization funded by conservative financiers Charles and David Koch.

With a large red binder of documents in hand, Davis said he was ready to "educate" his Senate colleagues again by [filibustering any vote on the legislation](#) which would also raise drivers license fees, registration costs and the cap on the state's vehicle sales tax.

"Until their money is being spent properly and until dollars are being spent based on a statewide assessment of needs instead of parochialism, no new gas taxes will pass," Davis said.

The opposing groups, which have been advocating on road infrastructure issues for years now, were both armed with their own numbers.

The opponents had a poll, which suggested the majority of South Carolinians wanted roads funded without a gas tax.

The proponents of the bill had a new report from Washington, D.C.-based TRIP, a group that researches highway-related infrastructure issues, that estimated state residents are spending \$1,850 extra per year on vehicle repairs, traffic crashes and congestion-related gas costs.

Pitts said it's time to start talking about how much it's costing South Carolinians every year not to fix the roads.

Lawmakers in the Palmetto State have

not raised the gas tax, which provides recurring funding for roads, since 1987.

While much of the conversation has focused on the need for additional revenue, Davis and other senators opposed to the tax increase are demanding administrative changes to the S.C. Department of Transportation first.

During the committee process, Davis argued against the move that stripped the reform measures from the House version of the bill and offered up his own amendments that would have eliminated the DOT Commission and the State Transportation Infrastructure Board.

Davis and other anti-tax Republicans want the DOT secretary to be a true Cabinet position appointed by the governor. They complain of the General Assembly's political influence on transportation spending decisions.

There is a bipartisan group of senators seeking to pass the road infrastructure bill and get it to Gov. Henry McMaster's desk, but the legislative battle likely wouldn't end there.

With McMaster [vowing to oppose the tax increase](#), the bill would have to gain enough support in the Senate to overcome that expected veto.

On Monday at the ribbon cutting for a new highway welcome center, McMaster made it clear where he stands.

"I don't think we need to raise taxes. I think there are other ways to get the money from other places without raising taxes," McMaster said. "There have been a lot of proposals. We're studying. We're listening. We're talking to people. But I do not want to raise the taxes on the people of South Carolina. Period."

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