

# The State

## Some SC GOP senators threaten to block gas-tax increase

By Jamie Self

[jself@thestate.com](mailto:jself@thestate.com)

The state Senate showdown over raising South Carolina's gas tax now is set.

Three hours after business groups said Tuesday that 2017 is the year that lawmakers must find new money to fix the state's crumbling roads and bridges, a handful of anti-tax Republican state senators vowed to block a gas tax hike.

"This debate has gone on long enough," said Otis Rawl, chief executive of the Lexington Chamber of Commerce, told a State House rally, endorsing a tax hike.

Not long after Rawl and his allies cleared out, state Sen. Tom Davis, R-Beaufort, rallied with the Koch brothers-backed Americans for Prosperity, Club for Growth and tea party activists to "Tank the Tax."

Those groups called for reforming how state transportation dollars are spent instead of raising taxes.

Davis has filibustered previous gas-tax increase proposals and Tuesday said he would do it again — "until they realize that until money is being spent properly up here ... that no new gas taxes will pass."

The competing warning shots were fired in anticipation of the upcoming debate in the 46-member Senate on a roads plan that featured a 12-cent-a-gallon tax hike, over six years, in the state's 16.75 cent-a-gallon gas tax. The proposal also would raise driver's license, vehicle registration and other fees.

**Meanwhile, a national transportation advocacy group said Tuesday that state's roads are costing Columbia drivers an extra \$1,760 a year in increased operating costs, crashes and congestion-related issues.**

Endorsing a gas tax, S.C. Chamber of Commerce president Ted Pitts said the bigger question is not how much it will cost to fix the state's roads but "how much it's going to cost South Carolinians to do nothing."

The debate over how best to pay for road improvements has dragged on for years. State transportation officials say the state needs about \$1 billion a year more to return the state's highways and bridges to good condition.

However, Davis and others say they want the state Transportation Department reformed first so that its director answers directly to the governor.

Now, the director is appointed by a eight-member commission that is appointed by the governor. However, Davis said a handful of legislators actually control how transportation dollars are spent.

"You can ask why a sleepy two-lane road got five-laned while a (deadly) highway down in Jasper County that doesn't have any political clout ... doesn't get funded," Davis said.

"You can call and ask that question, but you're not going to get an answer. They don't care because they're not accountable to you."

Jamie Self: [803-771-8658](tel:803-771-8658), [@jamiemself](https://twitter.com/jamiemself)