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Tennessee speaker to GOP: Show civility in gas tax debate

By ERIK SCHELZIG and JONATHAN MATTISE, Associated Press



Nashville, Tenn. - Speaker Beth Harwell is calling on her Republican colleagues to show civility as the Tennessee House prepares for a contentious vote Wednesday on Gov. Bill Haslam's transportation funding proposal.

Harwell, a Nashville Republican mulling a bid for governor next year, urged members to "be kind to one another" even if they disagree on the substance of the bill that would raise the state's gas tax for the first time since 1989.

"This is going to be a hard week; we've got a big vote," Harwell said Monday. "No matter how you come down on this, we're

going to have good Republicans for this bill, we're going to have good Republicans against this bill."

Supporters note that it would make deeper cuts in areas like the sales tax on groceries than it would raise at the pump. Opponents question that math and have vowed to vote against any tax increase.

TRIP, a national transportation research group, released a study Tuesday that says deterioration, congestion and lack of safety features on Tennessee roads and bridges cost state drivers \$6 billion annually in higher operating costs, traffic crashes and congestion-related delays.

The average extra cost to each driver annually is \$2,019 in Memphis, \$1,667 in Nashville, \$1,471 in Chattanooga and \$1,376 in Knoxville, the report says.

Republican Rep. Jerry Sexton of Bean Station has angered some GOP colleagues supporting the bill by berating them in a committee hearing, on the House floor and at a news conference.

Sexton has called it a "farce" to argue that tax cuts in Haslam's package are larger than the fuel tax increases. Republicans will have to explain themselves to the voters, he said.

"When you go to the pump, Republicans did it to you," he said. "Don't blame the Democrats."

Tennessee's gas tax is now 21.4 cents per gallon and its diesel tax is 18.4 cents per gallon. The transportation funding bill would raise the gas tax by 6 cents over three years, and the diesel tax by 10 cents over the same time period.

The some \$350 million the measure would add to road funding would be offset by a projected \$400 million in cuts to other taxes. They include a 20 percent reduction in the sales tax on groceries, a \$113 million cut in corporate taxes paid by manufacturers and a 1 percent reduction in the tax on earnings from stocks and bonds.

Haslam argues the new road funding is needed to begin chipping away at a \$10.5 billion backlog of road and bridge projects across the state. The bill lists nearly 1,000 projects that would be funded with the new revenue.