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‘Roads are getting worse’ in Missouri, but is raising the gas tax the solution?

By Allison Kite

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Driving east on Interstate 70 with only a narrow emergency shoulder to the right and a low barrier on the left to defend against westbound traffic, it's hard to argue Missouri's roads need work.

The main artery from Kansas City to St. Louis is part of a massive state highway system — one that the Missouri Department of Transportation says is underfunded to the tune of \$170 million just to maintain roads and bridges.

According to MoDOT, nearly 1,200 of the state's bridges are weight-restricted and 922 are in poor condition. In a state stationed at the crossroads of the U.S. with an economy driven by agriculture, the roads are an essential asset.

It would take another \$825 million a year to close the gap on high-priority transportation needs, like reconstructing I-70 or improving the state's railways, [according to the department's funding guide](#).

The solution? A coalition of construction companies, unions, business organizations and civic groups argue it's a [10-cent gas tax increase](#) that would raise Missouri's long-unchanged gas tax to 27 cents per gallon, up from 17 cents, where it's been for more than 20 years.

Supporters point out the money raised by the gas tax doesn't pay for nearly as much as it once did because of inflation.

The Missouri General Assembly passed the increase this spring, but under the state constitution, voters have to approve tax increases at the ballot. Proposition D, supported by [SaferMO.com](#), will be on the midterm ballots Tuesday.

“Roads are getting worse and this is our best opportunity to address the problem directly, with a motor fuel tax increase so those who are using the roads are paying for the roads,” said Scott Charton, communications director for SaferMO.com.

Charton is also one of the Star's [Missouri Influencers](#), a panel of dozens of leaders from across the state who have been answering readers' questions about an array of policy issues facing the state for the Missouri Influencer Series.

But Proposition D is not without critics. Unlike an income tax, a per-gallon tax on gasoline costs the same for high- and low-income drivers.

Critics also took issue with the language of the initiative.

At the polls, voters will be asked whether they want to approve a gradual tax increase to fund law enforcement. The Missouri State Highway Patrol is already reimbursed through the gas tax and would see a small increase as a result of the ballot initiative, but the dedicated funding for law enforcement would free up the existing gas tax revenue for roads, Charton said.

Influencer Crosby Kemper III, director of the Kansas City Public Library and co-founder of the Show-Me Institute, took issue with the language. He said if he didn't get a better explanation for the wording, he'd vote against it.

“This is another failure from both Jefferson City and the organizations who try to design these things,” Kemper said. “Too many people in this state trying to be clever.”

In this final installment of the Influencer series, The Star's readers wanted to know: Would raising the gas tax help Missouri maintain its road infrastructure?

The Influencers overwhelmingly backed the gas tax proposal, an issue that makes rare allies of labor groups and chambers of commerce.

The fight for transportation funds

For years, transportation officials and advocates have been warning the state can't keep up with the demands of its highway system. The current 17-cent gas tax is one of the lowest in the country and hasn't increased since 1996. Every state around Missouri charges a higher gas tax.

According to MoDOT, 17 cents now has less than half of the purchasing power it did in 1996.

Other state revenue sources, like income and sales taxes, are portions of people's incomes or purchase prices.

Rep. Scott Fitzpatrick, chair of the House Budget Committee, said he agrees the gas tax has lost its purchasing power, but he hasn't decided how he'll vote Tuesday. He voted against the proposal in the House because of the ballot language about using the funds for public safety.

“As the person whose job it would be to actually execute the bait-and-switch if it passes, I didn't feel comfortable voting to put that on the ballot that way,” Fitzpatrick said.

But solutions to the state's transportation funding woes have been hard to come by.

Voters rejected an across-the-board sales tax increase at the ballot in 2014. It would have raised an estimated \$5.4 billion over its 10-year lifespan.

Legislators this year proposed massive tax packages that included income tax cuts and increased funds for roads, but over the course of the session, the tax packages were rewritten and split up. A gas tax proposal was finally attached to a bill that gives an individual income tax deduction for awards won by Olympic athletes and passed in the waning days of session.

There's no campaign organized to oppose Proposition D despite hesitation on the part of some.

“Quite frankly, in the state of Missouri, you don't really need organized opposition to beat a tax increase,” Fitzpatrick said.

Road problems a reality

Even those with qualms about the gas tax increase acknowledge the state's roads are in trouble. Michael Barrett, director of the Missouri State Public Defender's office, said the gas tax is “regressive” and would disproportionately harm low-income individuals.

“That said, it would be assessed proportionally to the extent one uses the roads,” Barrett said. “To the (extent) we need a dedicated funding source, it's probably the best option.”

The [American Society of Civil Engineers gave Missouri a C- for its infrastructure](#). Roads earned a D+, and according to the report, Missouri spends less than half of the national per mile average on operations and maintenance.

“Without action in the state legislature, funding constraints are anticipated to continue, leaving Missouri's ability to sustainably fund future roadway maintenance and improvement projects in jeopardy,” the report says.

According to TRIP, a national transportation research group, Kansas City-area residents lose nearly \$2,000 every year in higher vehicle operating costs, car crashes and lost time because of traffic-related delays.

Kansas City Mayor Sly James, an Influencer, noted the numerous bridges in poor condition.

“We know this all too well here in Kansas City,” James said. “The Buck O'Neil bridge was in critical need of repair, but with the state short of funding, we had to take care of it ourselves. That is not a sustainable solution.”

Proposition D

What's different this time, Charton argued, is that the gas tax is a user fee. Missouri drivers fund the roads they drive on.

Patrick Ishmael, an Influencer and director of government accountability for the Show-Me Institute, agreed.

“Infrastructure is an appropriate role of government, and to the extent that it can be underwritten by taxes that are similar in nature to a user fee, the better the policy,” Ishmael said. “That way, in the case of roads, the folks who use it, pay for it.”

But unlike an income tax, gas tax is the same price no matter what the driver's income. Luis Cordoba, Kansas City Public Schools' chief student support and intervention officer, said the tax increase would "hurt the working poor, low- and middle-income families."

"An increase in the gas tax (lessens) the amount of money in their pockets as well as all the consumers that need to drive to go to work," Cordoba said.

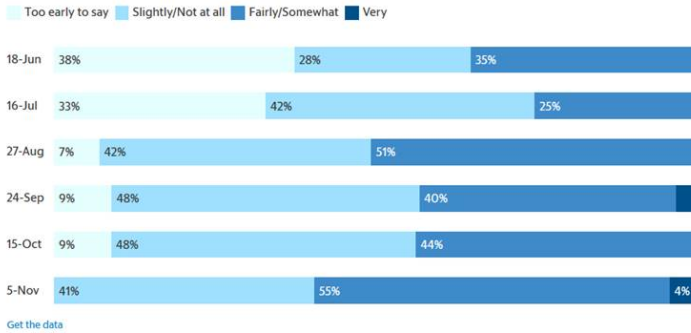
He also worried the tax hike would increase the cost of consumer goods.

"The goods we receive in our markets and stores are brought through our highway systems, trucks, train, boats, etc.," Cordoba said.

"Consumers would get hit more ways than one through higher cost at the grocery store and all other consumer-related purchases."

Missouri Influencers Benchmark Question

McClatchy asked its panel of Missouri Influencers how well the 2018 candidates are doing in focusing on policy solutions this election year.



Rough and congested roads and bridges that lack some safety features are costing Kansas City drivers nearly \$2,000 a year, according to a new report released Wednesday. The Washington-based transportation research group TRIP said costs could go higher. File photo The Kansas City Star