

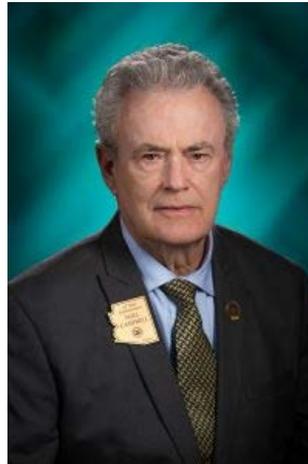
ARIZONA CAPITOL TIMES

Now is the time to address the urban-rural divide in road maintenance

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US 60 Pinto Creek Bridge. Photo courtesy of Arizona Department of Transportation



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We need to maintain our roads to protect our families and the people we care about. Safe and well-maintained roads prevent collisions and ensure that our loved ones can safely get to school, work, church, or other places. They also let us spend less time stuck in traffic and more time with our family.

Over the past month, members of the House Transportation Committee have heard briefings from elected officials and representatives from every corner of Arizona. From ADOT and county governments to rural and metropolitan cities and towns, my suspicions have been confirmed – the state is dramatically underfunded when it comes to road maintenance.

In their presentation, ADOT shared that only 59% of the state's bridges are in "good condition." Even more troubling, only 35% of the pavement in the highway system can say the same. ADOT projected that the current revenue gap to address the 25-year needs of highways – including preservation, modernization, and expansion – is troublingly high at \$30.5 billion.

During their testimony, the League of Arizona Cities and Towns stated that the unidentified and identified maintenance backlog is already up to \$3.1 billion, and they are still working to complete their statewide inventory.

When you turn to rural Arizona, the situation is even worse. Cochise County estimated that 20% to 25% of their roads are in poor or very poor condition. Greenlee estimated their number of poor or very poor roads at a staggering 47%. Apache County revealed that their funding gap for road needs grows by \$1.2 billion each year.

The urban-rural divide is a real political and social issue that plagues not only Arizona but our entire country. It's not only impacting our politics; it's impacting the safety of our communities. The rate of traffic fatalities on Arizona's rural roads is the third highest in the nation and is more than double the fatality rate on all other roads in the state, according to TRIP, a national transportation research group.

If the more urbanized portions of Arizona, Maricopa and Pima Counties continue to tax themselves for infrastructure funding while the rest of the state falls behind, we will create a permanent division in our state – economically, politically, and socially. It will also deny those communities the economic opportunities that are afforded to the more densely populated parts of our state.

This division of "haves" and "have nots" cannot endure any longer. We must address this problem now – today – and in this legislative session.

Since 1991, 47 other states have increased their highway use fees, while Arizona has

fallen behind. Use fees, in the form of things, such as a gas tax, are supposed to ensure vehicles help pay the roads they are using. However, over the past 30 years, number of lanes in Arizona has increased by 32%, while the purchasing power of the state's gas tax to maintain them has dropped by 48%.

To make matters worse, electric and hybrid vehicles pay virtually nothing for the roads they use. Everyone, regardless of vehicle type, should pay to maintain roads. We must close this loophole and make sure everyone pays their fair share of the maintenance costs of the roads they use.

As Chairman of the House Transportation Committee, I have introduced legislation co-sponsored by House Speaker Rusty Bowers and Senate President Karen Fann to remedy this problem. My proposal will set the rate per gallon for gas and propane motor vehicle fuel at 24 cents and increase it to 30 cents in 2021 and 36 cents in 2022. Electric and hybrid vehicles would be subject to a corresponding road usage fee to ensure they pay their fair share for road maintenance in Arizona.

I suspect that some of my colleagues will not agree with this idea. But to them I ask: if not this, what is your solution? You wouldn't buy a house and not pay for upkeep. Why should we continue to build new roads with no plan to maintain them? It's simply irresponsible.

As the saying goes, "If not now, when? If not us, who?" Arizona is one of the fastest growing states in the country. Failing to invest in transportation infrastructure reduces our economic competitiveness, poses serious safety risks, and costs us millions in lost time. We can't afford to do nothing.

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