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Will third time be the charm? Missouri lawmakers may ask voters to raise gas tax in 2021

Kurt Erickson

EFFERSON CITY — Two years after Missouri voters decisively rejected a proposal to raise Missouri’s gasoline tax, the leader of the Senate wants a do-over.

Senate President [Dave Schatz](#), R-Sullivan, has filed two proposals that would phase in a 10-cent increase in the motor fuel tax, which currently stands at 17 cents per gallon.

Both measures would be put to voters next year if Schatz can steer the legislation through the Senate and House when the chambers reconvene in January.

“It’s going to be tough either way. But I think it’s necessary,” Schatz said Friday. “Building and maintaining our infrastructure is one of the core functions of government.”

The proposed ballot initiatives were filed at the same time [a new report](#) found that drivers lose \$8 billion yearly on Missouri’s roadways due to rough roads, congestion and lack of some safety features.

The report by TRIP, a national transportation research group, found that the cost is as much as \$1,917 per driver in some areas of the state.

“The TRIP report confirms what we know about the deficiencies in the condition of our transportation system in Missouri — there are not enough resources to properly maintain it,” Missouri Department of Transportation Director Patrick McKenna said. “Missouri’s basic infrastructure condition will continue to get worse until the proper funding is addressed.”

The state’s fuel tax hasn’t increased since 1996, but voters have been vocal about keeping it low. It currently is the second lowest in the U.S., after Alaska’s 14-cent tax.

A 2014 referendum to augment it with a state sales-tax hike failed. A 2018 referendum also was dumped, despite having strong bipartisan support.

“We’ve got to have a conversation about how we’re going to do this,” Schatz said. “I think the gas tax is the most fair. It’s a user fee.”

The [increase, had it been approved, would have assigned an estimated \\$123 million a year](#) when fully in effect, directly to cities and counties for local road and bridge improvements and \$288 million to the Missouri Highway Patrol.

The referendum passed in the state’s larger cities, but was rejected by large margins in southern counties.

Schatz’s proposal is likely to have the support of Gov. Mike Parson and Lt. Gov. Mike Kehoe, a former chairman of the [Missouri Highway and Transportation Commission](#). Both backed

the failed 2018 referendum. They were elected to four-year terms by large margins last month.

Rep. [Steve Butz](#), D-St. Louis, has introduced a similar proposal in the Republican-controlled House. But, incoming Speaker [Rob Vescovo](#), R-Arnold, previously said he opposes increasing the tax.

The [Missouri Chamber of Commerce and Industry](#), a pro-business lobbying organization, also is backing an increase.

“Our transportation infrastructure could be one of the greatest economic opportunities for our state — or one of the greatest economic failures of our generation,” Chamber President Dan Mehan said.

The TRIP report said 9% of locally and state-maintained bridges are rated poor or structurally deficient.

Congestion in St. Louis and other urban areas adds to increased costs for motorists, causing as much as 47 annual hours of delay for the average driver, the study noted.

Schatz said supporters also need to ensure there will be money to finance a campaign designed to convince voters to back the increase.

“You’ve got to have resources behind a statewide campaign,” Schatz said.

The renewed push comes as MoDOT has watched the pandemic deplete revenues with fewer people driving.

In April, for example, there was a 38% drop in vehicle travel compared to the same month a year earlier. The number has since rebounded, but was still down 6% in September.



Traffic moves slowly on northbound Interstate 270 at Interstate 44 on Jan. 7, 2008, in southwest St. Louis County. (Post-Dispatch file photo by J.B. Forbes)