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EDITORIAL

The Missourian's View: Sen. Schatz Is Right — Missouri Needs More Funding For Roads, Bridges

By The Missourian's Editorial Board

Driving on bad roads costs us money. So does driving on congested roads or those that lack certain safety features.

How much money?

TRIP, a Washington, D.C.-based transportation research nonprofit, put the cost at \$1,917 annually for drivers in the St. Louis area.

Overall, Missouri drivers lose an estimated \$8 billion a year in lost productivity and automobile operating costs because of the poor condition of local and state roads, according to a TRIP report released this month.

How bad are our roads? TRIP found that over half of Missouri's major roads and highways are in poor or mediocre condition due to inadequate state and local funding.

You've heard it before, but it bears repeating. At nearly 34,000 miles, Missouri has the country's seventh-largest highway system. With 10,000 bridges, it ranks sixth in the country. Yet at 17 cents a gallon, our state has the second-lowest gas tax in the nation behind only Alaska's 14-cent-per-gallon tax. That is not sustainable.

Everyone loves cheap gas. A few weeks ago, news reports said Missouri had the cheapest gas in the country. But if the TRIP report is correct, we are paying for our underinvestment in infrastructure in other ways. Our state's inadequate and unsustainable funding of its transportation system is costing all of us dearly — just not at the pump.

Missouri hasn't raised its gas sales tax since 1996. Several attempts to increase funding in recent years flamed out. Two years ago, Proposition D, a gradual 10-cent-per-gallon increase, failed 54 percent to 46 percent in the state, prevailing in just six counties, all of which are located along Interstate 70.

Prop D suffered from confusing ballot language, which made it appear that most of the new tax would go to the Missouri State Highway Patrol — not state highways. Even if it had passed, many said it was too modest given the need.

Some political leaders haven't given up the fight to improve our state's infrastructure. Franklin County's Dave Schatz, R-Sullivan, is one of those leaders. Schatz, president pro tem of the Missouri Senate and a former chairman of the Senate Transportation Committee, has been a consistent advocate of greater investment in the state's infrastructure. He understands the need as well as anyone and hasn't let

politics or the uncomfortable issue of raising taxes get in the way of what he knows is in the best interest of the state. He appreciates the fact that the state's economic fortunes are tied directly to infrastructure.

Schatz has prefiled a 2021 bill that would ask voters to increase the gas tax by 2 cents annually beginning July 1, 2021, for five years until it is 27 cents per gallon in 2026. He told reporters last week that it was going to be a tough sell but raising the gas tax is "necessary."

Schatz is right. More funding is necessary for our roads and bridges, which are deteriorating. Common sense dictates you take care of what you have. He and Gov. Mike Parson and Lt. Gov. Mike Kehoe deserve credit for not ignoring this issue. They campaigned hard for the increase in 2018. The need hasn't gone away.

To be sure, Missouri isn't the only state with a transportation funding deficit. Many states face the same problem.

However, unlike Missouri, other states have taken action by raising gas taxes in recent years.

The Institute of Taxation and Economic Policy reported that Illinois was the 31st state to raise or reform its gas tax this past decade.

Increasingly, other state lawmakers, including many in red states, are deciding that outdated gas taxes need to be raised and reformed to fund infrastructure projects that are vital to their economies. These actions are helping reverse losses in gas tax purchasing power caused by rising construction costs and improvements in vehicle fuel efficiency.

And a growing group of states have decided to not just fix past problems, but plan for the future as well. Eight states have abandoned fixed-rate gas taxes (flat cent-per-gallon taxes) since 2013 in favor of variable-rate gas tax structures that will allow them to raise sustainable gas tax revenues for the long haul. That is the smart way to go.

While raising taxes is usually a contentious topic, there has been a remarkable level of agreement on the gasoline tax, which is a user fee that has a proven track record as an efficient and equitable way to pay for road improvements. It still works.

We just need to adjust ours to address the present reality of our state's present infrastructure condition.