America's highway infrastructure needs money, manpower — and a new vision

How We Can Save Our Roads

By Earl Swift

Publication Date: 03/08/2009

Find New Revenue

Even approaches such as Missouri's and Pennsylvania's don't come close to covering the gap between highway spending and need. That's especially true given the rising price of construction and materials and—more vexing—a slide in highway income.

For more than 50 years, Washington has paid for its share of road-building from a trust fund nourished by taxes on fuel, tires, and heavy trucks. But since 2006, a confluence of factors—high gas prices that forced motorists to drive less, cars that get better gas mileage, and the emergence of alternative fuels—has caused a shortfall. The financial strain today is so great that Congress had to inject an extra $8 billion into the fund last fall.

As a result, highway planners are looking for new income to keep America rolling. One old-fashioned solution—toll roads—is making a comeback. In fact, says John Horsley, more than 30% of new highway capacity has been at least partly financed by tolls over the last decade. "They'll continue to play a major role in rapidly growing states," he predicts.

Another possible solution: swapping the gas tax for one based on miles driven. Such a system, proponents including Missouri's Rahn argue, would compensate for the increased use of fuel-efficient vehicles and better reflect a driver's actual use of highways. More important, perhaps, this kind of tax would be less vulnerable to fluctuations in fuel prices and improvements in fuel economy. A recent study in Oregon showed that a miles-driven tax could be charged during fuel stops with minimal fuss.

An even more ambitious strategy is "congestion pricing." This system would require motorists to pay tolls based on market forces—more when demand is higher, less when the going's easy. Such systems would rely on electronic devices carried aboard each vehicle, eliminating the need for toll booths and enabling road officials to adjust toll rates by the quarter, the month, or even several times an hour, depending on the traffic.

Simpler versions of the idea already are being tried in Houston, San Diego, Seattle, and several other cities. For a fee, drivers can travel "express toll" or "HOT" lanes once reserved for car pools, not only speeding their own commutes but also easing traffic and wear on the regular lanes.

In Philadelphia, the cracked pillar in Interstate 95 that caused such mayhem last March has been reinforced for the time being with steel. The stretch of highway on which it's located, now 42 years old, is scheduled for reconstruction as part of a $2 billion project that will swap out about seven miles of elevated interstate over 10 years.

The stimulus package could herald more such work. Horsley says he can identify some 3000 road projects that could begin in a matter of weeks if financing were available. "We think we can employ a million people over the next year," he says, "and build facilities that will last for the next 50 years.

"These are jobs that can't be shipped overseas," he adds. "They're jobs for Americans, building American infrastructure, to make the country stronger."

The Worst Roads in America
We talked with some of the 7500 truckers with Chattanooga-based U.S. Xpress Enterprises about the toughest stretches of highway in America. Here's what they chose:

- **I-10 in Louisiana:** "Dramatically uneven concrete slabs."
- **I-40 in Oklahoma:** "Broken and potholed pretty bad."
- **I-55, I-57, I-80, and I-90 in Illinois:** "The pavement's all broken. Some stretches are just horrible."
- **I-65 in Kentucky:** "Amazing that trucks aren't damaged by the potholes."
- **I-280 in New Jersey:** "So uneven you literally bounce out of your seat."
- **I-95 from Wilmington, Del., to Boston:** "Potholes that make you grimace."& amp; amp; amp; amp; amp; amp; amp; amp; amp; amp; amp; amp; amp; amp; amp; amp; amp; amp; #160;
- **All roads in Michigan:** "Real rough— especially I-75 into Detroit."

What are the worst roads near you? Tell us in the comments section below...

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Road Taxes

by plcf posted: 03/09/2009 10:12:PM

I understand that the current fuel tax is not enough to cover the cost of upkeep for our highways. I also realize that many people think that Prius drivers are getting a big break under the current fuel tax system. Many think this is very unfair. I would be one of them if I thought that a Prius damaged the roads as much as other cars. The truth is that weight must be taken into account when imposing a fair mileage tax. When calculating the damage one vehicle does compared to another use the following formula (only valid for vehicles with the same number of axles):

(light vehicle weight / heavy vehicle weight)^4

This shows how much more road damage is done by the heavy vehicle compared to the light vehicle.

An example is a Toyota Camry that weighs 3483 pounds and a Toyota Prius that weighs 2934. The weight ratio is 1.187. When raised to the forth power this becomes 1.986. So the Camry does almost twice the road damage as the Prius, yet it is only a 18.7% heavier.

Under the current fuel tax system the Camry (25 MPG) pays 1.840 times the Prius (46 MPG) for the same miles driven. Under a fair mileage system the Camry would pay 1.986 times the amount of the Prius. One extreme example is the Smart fortwo and the Camry. The fortwo only does 7% the road damage as the Camry. The other extreme is the Hummer H2 SUV which does 11.4 times the road damage as the Camry. The most extreme is the Hummer and the Smart fortow. The H2 does 157 times the road damage as the Smart Car, yet the Hummer under the current system only pays about 3.6 times the tax as the Smart Car for the same miles driven.

From the examples you can see that if the goal of the road tax is to maintain the roads and to tax people based on the damage their vehicles do to the roads, the current system is unfair to small vehicles. Even the not so small best MPG Prius comes out worse then a mid size sedan. If the technical and privacy problems of a mileage tax can be worked out I would be in favor of the tax if and only if road damage is taken into account.

REPLY | Number of replies:0

Road Taxes

by plcf posted: 03/09/2009 10:10:PM

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REPLY | Number of replies:0

The Worst Roads in america

by onei3430 posted: 03/09/2009 10:10:PM

I-59, Birmingham to Chattanooga, Tn. I lost 2 hubcabs on one trip home from Birmingham! I like most oters people drive mainly in the left lane, except when I have to get in the right lane for a short distance. Can't anyone help?

REPLY | Number of replies:4

‡ ***RE:* by hugo budzien worst roads**

worst roads

posted:03/11/2009 10:19:AM

* We are full time RVrs and we find too many roads to single out any single one. However, the one common thread is that the right lane is usually worse than the others, and there is a lot of big heavy trucks on that road. You did a good thing in asking the truckers which roads are worst as they have caused a lot of the damage. My solution: Prohibit any trucking over 250 miles and put the trailers on piggyback railroad trains. Second step would be to electrify the railroads and power them with coal and nuclear generated electricity. Just think how much oil that we would not have to import then, and, it is available technology, not something we have yet to invent. *

REPLY TO THIS |

‡ ***RE:* by gilletlb saving roads**

saving roads

posted:03/11/2009 08:51:AM

* The very best way to fix roads is to CONSERVE them in the first place. The very best way to do this is to PUT THE FREIGHT BACK ON THE RAILROADS WHERE IT BELONGS! The behemoth tractor trailers which terrorize everyone on the road in all sorts of weather, do 95% of the highway damage, cause 90% of nasty accidents, 90% pollution of air, water soil, cause major noise pollution and untold acts of damaging behaviour they aren't even aware of because they didn't see that car they pushed off the road which overturned in the ditch or ran off the cliff! The bigger they are the more damage. Decades ago a study was done, when trucks were smaller, showing that ONE truck did the DAMAGE of 15,000 cars per unit travel!!!! What must it be now? The teamsters union/trucking industy is so powerful in congress that this info can barely be made public. Make it so, please.   *

REPLY TO THIS |

‡ ***RE:* by may1960 worst roads in ...**

worst roads in america

posted:03/10/2009 12:11:PM

* Highway's 169 and 136 in northern Missouri are really bad, they have lots of pot holes and we seem never to get satisfactory repairs since we don't live close to an*

*"important" metropolitan city. In this area be careful if you drive down a blacktop road, they are even worse and dangerous to drive on. neglected in the country!   *

REPLY TO THIS |

RE: ***by topdogblu the worst roads...***

the worst roads in america

posted:03/10/2009 07:45:AM

* I-530 north pine bluff to little rock arkansas, the roads are horrible, they patch and patch the roads and they get worse, ex-governor huckabee made a statement during his run for the president about how wonderful the roads are in arkansas, it's obvious he did not travel I-530 too often *

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