

Guest editorial: Exploring a better way to fund - Yakima Herald-Republic (WA) - September 12, 2021

September 12, 2021 | Yakima Herald-Republic (WA) | JAMES "JIM" RESTUCCI Washington State Transportation Commission

In the Aug. 22 editorial "Construction ahead: WSDOT's budget is wearing thin," WSDOT shared concerns about stretched budgets for state road and bridge funding. As a local elected official, with almost 20 years of experience, I have seen firsthand, "Band-Aid" approaches to highway maintenance in the Yakima Valley. More importantly, I have witnessed the difficult choices cities and towns must make when it comes to funding their transportation systems.

Which poses the question: Is there a better solution that will address our strained transportation budgets?

In my role as a commissioner on the Washington State Transportation Commission (WSTC), serving Yakima Valley and Eastern Washington, I am happy to share that we are exploring options that could ensure long-term, sustainable funding for the maintenance and preservation of the roads and bridges in our region and state.

Currently, most of Washington's transportation funding comes from the 49.4 cent-per-gallon state gas tax. As fuel efficiency increases, and automakers shift their fleets from gasoline combustion engines to all-electric, hybrids or alternative fuel vehicles, the gas tax is becoming a less reliable source of funding our transportation needs.

Forecasts show that over the next 14 years, by 2035, our state's gas tax revenues will drop by nearly half. This sharp reduction in fuel consumption will overwhelm our ability to fund basic transportation needs like maintaining our roads and bridges.

While some lawmakers are proposing an increase in the gas tax, this would be a short-term solution.

Hardest hit are those who drive older, less fuel-efficient vehicles, because these drivers must fill up more frequently; thus paying more than drivers of newer, more fuel-

efficient vehicles. This means that rural and low-income residents will bear the growing financial burden for the roads and bridges we all use.

One promising option we are exploring in Washington state is the idea of a user-based, pay-per-mile system, also called a road usage charge (RUC). Rather than paying a tax on every gallon of fuel,

drivers would only pay by the mile. Transitioning to this kind of system for our road funding would ensure everyone pays only for what they use, regardless of how their vehicle is powered.

Washington state piloted an RUC for a year (2018-19) as a potential replacement to the gas tax. About 2,000 drivers across the state (including 70 drivers from Yakima County) took part in the pilot.

Many of the test participants, especially those in rural areas of the state, worried that they would pay more under a road usage charge than our current gas tax system. However, today, Washington drivers could be paying as much as 6 cents per mile under the gas tax, but would pay only 2.4 cents per mile under the RUC. This means many rural and low-income drivers would actually pay less in taxes for the roads under a per-mile fee structure.

Several other states — like Oregon, Utah and Virginia — are moving ahead with pay-per-mile systems. Oregon, for example, implemented its OReGO road usage charge program in 2013. Today, over a dozen other states, and the federal government are testing or exploring road usage charging as a replacement for the gas tax.

While the test-driving portion of the Washington Road Usage Charge Pilot Project ended in 2019, the Legislature has asked the WSTC and the Road Usage Charge Steering Committee to continue researching, analyzing and tailoring a program that would benefit all Washington drivers.

As a member of the WSTC, I am optimistic that RUC could provide a long-term solution to the state's current transportation funding challenges.