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Transportation advocates to lobby for gas tax

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Future solutions for dwindling transportation revenues may rely heavily on taxpayer support if the Transportation Advocates of Texas is able to successfully implement its newest campaign.

Vic Suhm, a member of the North Texas Commission and representative for Transportation Advocates of Texas, said in an online conversation about transportation revenue that the lack of funding for transportation in North Texas has led to increased maintenance costs for vehicles.

Because of this, he said, people are paying more money to service their vehicles than they would to help keep roads maintained.

"It is not free to do nothing," Suhm said. "It costs us to live with a problem."

He said an increase of the motor fuels tax or an extra registration fee to help fund transportation projects should be among the options for the state to raise more revenue.

Allowing counties to raise transportation revenue is one of the legislative endeavors the advocate organization will be seeking, Suhm said. That way counties can participate in investment in transportation solutions.

"If the cost of fossil fuel goes up because the tax goes up, that might be an incentive to embrace alternative fuels, I guess," he said. "Obviously our interest is just in maintaining a revenue stream that's already inadequate to try to serve the investment needs to keep us mobile and keep the roads paved."

While he said he doesn't like paying taxes more than anyone else, he also does not like running over potholes or driving in congested traffic.

Suhm referenced a study done by the Texas Public Interest Research Group that showed Texas residents pay about \$335 per year in maintenance costs because of poor road quality. However, if a gas tax was effected, a person driving about 15,000 miles per year only would pay about \$5.21 per month in gas taxes.

Many people do not like the prospect of paying additional taxes, but he said it is necessary to maintain the roads before they become too far neglected.

Suhm said informing residents so they can petition legislators is the most important and will be the most effective way to enact legislation to increase revenues. Without the support of constituents, he said legislators are "too scared" to enact tax increases.

Frank Bliss, who also participated in the conversation, said transportation solutions are needed to help attract businesses into the North Texas area.

"Transportation yields economic benefits and it's important for the business community to let the legislature know that a strong transportation network is critical to Texas business," said Bliss, the president of real estate developer Cooper and Stebbins.

Raising the tax rate is not the only option, Suhm said, and the legislature could revoke the sales tax exemption on gasoline to broaden the sales tax base without raising tax rates.

Public-private partnerships are another area that could be explored to alleviate the pressure on the taxpayer.