

Keep open mind on road user fee program

JAMES M. WHITTY, Guest Column

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Recently, several letters to the editor have expressed disapproval of the state's proposal to test a "tax-by-mile" program as an alternative to the current gas tax.

My office is in charge of the pilot program (the Road User Fee Pilot Program), and I want to encourage everyone to have the facts about this proposal before coming to conclusions. That way, any Oregonian can offer valuable input when it comes to deciding if this -- or some other program -- is the right choice for the state and its citizens.

Over the past couple of years, Oregon has been exploiting alternatives to the gas tax. The original purpose of the gas tax (when it was established back in 1919) was to raise money for roads. Because vehicles have been getting better gas mileage since the mid-1970s, the gas tax will, at some point in the near future, no longer provide adequate funding for roads -- at a time when our population is booming and road usage is at an all-time high. The state is seeking an acceptable and viable revenue source, funded through "user pay" methods, to maintain, preserve and improve Oregon's state, county and city highway and road system.

Oregon's Road User Fee Pilot Project is the result of a 40-month effort to review alternatives to our state's gas tax revenue. After much research, discussion and public input, the best solution seems to be a mileage fee, and we will test the concept later this year in Eugene. It helps to understand the facts involved:

- The road user fee program does not track, store or collect private information. The switching device that counts miles in a vehicle is not capable of recording where a vehicle is located, except when it passes in and out of a designated "rush hour zone" -- and then it merely counts miles traveled in each zone, not the particular time of day, location in the zone or even what day. It is incapable of "tracking" motorists.

- The road user fee is a fair "you use, you pay" fee. The current gas tax revenue is no longer a fair user-based way to collect funds for roads. It was originally a fair "user fee" to pay for road repair, maintenance and building-when all vehicles got about the same mileage per gallon (this discussion exempts commercial trucks, which already pay a weight-mile tax in Oregon). But beginning in the mid 1970s, when vehicle miles-per-gallon started climbing, people who owned cars that got better gas mileage were paying less to use the same roads than those who had less fuel-efficient vehicles. More and more high-mile-per gallon vehicles are traveling Oregon roads -- and putting as much stress on roads and traffic as gas-powered vehicles. It's time to test a program that makes paying for roads fair and equitable.

- The road user fee would replace the gas tax (not be an addition to it) and funds would be used for the same highway projects as the current gas tax. Road user fees would not go into the state's general fund.

- The road user fee is a road tax, not an environmental tax. All passenger vehicles have about the same impact on roads, no matter how many miles per gallon they get. All these vehicles should pay the same for road usage. However, because Oregon values its environment, the road user fee program could encourage use of environmentally friendly vehicles by charging a higher per-mile fee for vehicles that get less than a certain number of miles per gallon, and this added charge could be considered an "environmental tax" and used for other purposes.

- A road user fee program could make commuting less stressful. Exploring the possibilities for "rush hour pricing" is a mandate of the Federal Highway Administration's Value Pricing Pilot Program. The Oregon Department of Transportation is receiving most of its funding for the Road User Fee Pilot Program from this source. Whether rush hour pricing would ultimately be part of a mileage fee program is a question the state legislature would have to answer later, if the state legislature desires. It is possible for a mileage fee to be imposed without rush hour pricing.

- The road user fee is a pilot program. We're testing a program that has many options and can change. If someone has a better idea, we're open to hearing it.

Transportation is crucial to our daily lives. Everyone relies on goods being moved safely and quickly. To repair, maintain and build new roads, we must have revenue, and most people agree that those who use the roads should be the ones who pay for them. We look forward to the results of Oregon's Road User Fee Pilot Project so we can determine if this -- or some other method -- is the best way to achieve our mutual goals. In the meantime, we encourage anyone to contact our office for accurate information on our pilot project, at <http://www.oregon.gov/ODOT>.

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