

The Oregonian

A good time for a sensibly managed Portland gas tax (OPINION)

By Guest Columnist Robert McCullough

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On Saturday, the New York Times editorial page recommended that states raise the gas tax. They reported that last year eight states did so. Oregon, whose gasoline and diesel use is above the U.S. average, dodged this logical step in the last legislature.

The arguments for a gas tax increase are compelling. Portland has traditionally underinvested in infrastructure in spite of its role as the transportation hub of the Pacific Northwest. Preliminary data from Oregon's Driver and Motor Vehicle Services indicates that Multnomah County is adding cars and light trucks at an accelerating rate – potentially as high as an additional 1 percent per month. In case the price shock at the pump has faded from our collective memories, retail gasoline prices are roughly half the level we paid five years ago. This is a tremendous windfall, and some, at least, should be put to a good use.

Traditionally, Portland's at-large commissioners have neglected infrastructure since press releases and glittery promises have tended to distract from the dull day-to-day city management issues. For our transportation infrastructure, this has created a tremendous backlog of nuts-and-bolts street-repair issues. Aspirational traffic planning has added to the problems as heavy trucks now wend their way through residential neighborhoods as they move raw materials and finished products between rail yards and factories.

Last summer Steve Novick called me several times to ask for my support for a 10-cent gasoline and diesel tax. This was courageous, since I had been a serious critic of his previous "arts tax" approach to the problem. I welcome his efforts in this direction and fervently hope that he keeps the tax simple and understandable. If he doesn't, the tax will go down to defeat and we will endure another cycle of potholes and poor traffic planning.

In my conversations with Ted Wheeler, we have discussed a twenty cent gasoline tax. My own very informal poll through the Nextdoor social media site indicates that almost as many Portlanders supported this higher level. The economics of a larger specific targeted tax are enormous. Fixing streets before complete failure is vastly cheaper than waiting. If we have a \$2/gallon "dividend" – reduction from past prices – investing \$.20/gallon in getting the job right is a tremendous investment.

In discussing this issue with neighbors and other community advocates, the problem of Portland's fascination with glittery objects is frequently raised. Many of us are concerned that the tax will be siphoned off for colorful, but less useful purposes. Again, funding immediate repairs through a bond offering would provide discipline – bond owners have legal protections that block funding pilferage.

Many of us grew up in Portland with the advertising refrain from Tom Peterson "free is a very good price." I would misquote him a bit to say "now is a very good time." Let's use the dividend wisely and fix what needs to be fixed while it is cost effective.