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# Editorial – Opinion

## Gas tax in the news

By Sen. Llew Jones SD-9

Most everyone remembers the magic day when they received their driver's license. Even students that struggle with other subjects are up for the challenge of this exam. The freedom of the road beckons. Despite the passing of 40 years, I vividly remember the exhilaration of getting my license. And Montanans love their rides. On a per capita basis, Montana has 1,120 licensed vehicles per 1,000 people. Only Wyoming has a slightly higher ratio.

However, vehicles are only part of the equation. The road itself is key to accessing Montana's many opportunities. Given limited public transportation and vast distances, Montanans drive an average of 12,000 miles per year. While nationwide fuel mileage requirements for 2017 are set at 24.8 mpg, the larger and older vehicle mix in Montana suggests lower gas mileage here. Assuming 20 mpg, driving 12,000 miles burns 600 gallons of gas. At this usage level, the current tax (set 1994) of 27.75 cents per gallon generates the highway fund \$3.20 per week per driver for road/bridge repair and maintenance.

So why is the gas tax in the news? Consider the numbers: When I obtained my license, my

first vehicle was an International Scout. It got 10 mpg on a good day. At 12,000 miles per year, the Scout generated \$6.40 a week in current road dollars. Today, a vehicle similar in size to the Scout, the Ford Explorer, has a window sticker fuel mileage of 27 highway mpg.

Even if we assume only a 5-mpg gain since 1994, the road repair dollars collected from driving the average 12,000 miles drops from \$4.27 per week in 1994 to 3.20 per week today. Increased road use is breaking down the roads more quickly while dollars to repair, maintain, and safety patrol the roads continue to decline. Moreover, a dollar buys less construction today than in 1994. Just as a benchmark, minimum wage in 1994 was \$4.25, today it is \$8.15.

Montana faces a decision point. Road and bridges will either need to be repaired and maintained at a much lower level, or it is time to consider an increase in the gas tax. Since Montana's natural resource and agriculture base requires a strong road and bridge infrastructure to function effectively, I am leaning towards supporting just such an increase. The caveat I insist on is that monies collected must remain targeted to the road, and that the Montana Department of

Transportation receive regular reviews ensuring that overhead costs are low and efficiency high.

As a business owner with numerous vehicles churning out road miles, I would obviously prefer to avoid additional cost, but I also recognize that, if this generation does not appropriately maintain infrastructure, the next generation will inherit a crumbling mess. I too can identify examples where I saw a state worker leaning on their shovel, or a construction crew not working efficiently, but overall, Montana's road investment has served us well. I would submit that the prudent course now is a continuation of responsible investment.

I am looking forward to hearing your ideas on this issue. I leave you with this thought from Ronald Reagan on roads, "Common sense tells us that it'll cost a lot less to keep the system we have in good repair than to let it crumble and then have to start all over again. Good tax policy decrees that wherever possible a fee for a service should be assessed against those who directly benefit from that service. Our highways were built largely with such a user fee -- the gasoline tax. I think it makes sense to follow that principle in restoring them to the condition we all want them to be in."