

# Opinion: Taxes not the cure for bad roads

By George Runner

California's roads are crumbling.

Reports routinely show our state has some of the poorest pavement conditions in the country, with high-tax liberal strongholds of San Francisco and Oakland leading the way. The culprit? Misplaced spending priorities.



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If you spilled your latte when hitting that huge pothole on the way to work, thank your elected leaders.

Gov. Jerry Brown says he has a fix for it – a 42 percent gas tax hike, plus a new \$65 vehicle registration fee that includes hybrids and electric vehicles. He claims the increases are needed because repairing California's highways can't be funded with existing revenues.

Why not?

Budgets are about priorities and the governor and legislative leaders have a say on how tax dollars are spent. State revenues have grown by roughly 50 percent in just under 10 years. And, apparently, Brown thinks the state can afford a \$68 billion – and growing – high-speed rail project that still hasn't found a way to deal with the Tehachapi Mountains.

In addition to about \$7 billion in annual fuel tax revenues, the state also collects a carbon tax from oil companies that brings in about \$2 billion. Oil suppliers pass the tax on to us at the pump. The Legislative Analyst's Office estimates this adds, at minimum, 11 cents per gallon to the cost of gasoline.

Where is all the money going?

Huge amounts go to projects that don't improve roads. Much of the carbon tax revenue will end up funding high-speed rail. The Democratic-controlled Legislature rejects every bill to direct these dollars toward reducing emission-generating traffic gridlock.

If Brown's plan to raise the gas tax passes – which seems likely given the new Democratic supermajority – Californians could end up paying as much as 80 cents in combined federal and state taxes for each gallon of gasoline – a rate far higher than any other state. Not to mention we already have some of the highest gas prices in the nation.

It isn't the elite who are squeezed by these costs. It is the less fortunate who struggle to find affordable housing and often must travel further to their workplaces.

Sadly, this is all by design.

Many Democrats envision a society where everyone is reliant on public transit. This "green" vision is attractive to Millennial voters, who tend to be issue-driven idealists. They believe we should all pay a little more to save the planet.

That's troubling, given the findings in a new report that shows Millennials are poorer and less employed than their Baby Boomer parents.

There are alternatives to raising taxes. The public should call upon the governor and Legislature to first consider the

following ideas:

- Audit the California Department of Transportation for savings. Experts agree Caltrans has wasted billions of taxpayer dollars in recent years, not counting the new Bay Bridge.
- Use cap-and-trade and existing revenue streams to target traffic gridlock and tackle deferred road maintenance.
- Enact legislation to ensure transportation dollars are spent on actual transportation projects, and require the California Transportation Commission to prioritize projects that provide the greatest economic benefits.

High taxes do not guarantee good roads. If our leaders have failed to properly prioritize and manage our existing tax dollars, is it really wise to give them more?

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