

DID YOU KNOW???

PAYING FOR HIGHWAY INFRASTRUCTURE MAJOR PROBLEM

As we drive all over the US and Canada we rarely think of who owns a given road or who maintains it and at what cost – we just drive on. David Orr, Director of Cornell Local Roads Program (CLRP) in Ithaca just commented on this in the August issue of CLRPs “Chatter Newsletter”. His comments got me to thinking about the same subject, and how expensive repair and maintenance is for our over four million miles (240,000 in NYS) of streets and highways and how we take our roads for granted and don’t worry about the cost of their maintenance.

Congress hasn’t raised the federal gas tax, now 18.4 cents per gallon for gasoline and 24.4 cents on diesel fuel, since 1993 when Bill Clinton was president. Meanwhile, according to a US Department of Transportation study, the average fuel economy of a passenger vehicle increased by 12 percent between 2005 and 2014, leading to reductions in fuel use and tax revenue. Federal gas tax revenue flows to states through the Highway Trust Fund, which Congress has kept solvent with transfers from other sources.

But a narrow majority of Americans, 55 percent according to a Bloomberg National Poll, say they would support an increase to help fix crumbling roads and bridges in their own states. Americans are tired of the condition of their roads and interstate highways and the 56,000 structurally deficient bridges nationwide, said Ray LaHood, a former US transportation secretary under President Barack Obama who supports raising the gas tax.

But, raising the gas tax could hit rural residents more, like us in Franklin County, as they normally drive farther distances and thus pay more in gas taxes than those living in urban areas. Thus, not surprisingly, those who live in cities are more supportive of a higher gas levy (59 percent) than those in rural areas (48 percent).

What’s interesting is that we in the US have some of the lowest gasoline prices in the industrialized world. The average cost per liter in the US is about \$.70; Canada is slightly over \$1.00, and in most of Europe a liter costs over \$1.50. In the US, higher gasoline taxes could add significant dollars to pay the mounting costs of highway maintenance.

Another dilemma we will face in the next several decades is the potential effect all-electric cars and hybrid cars will have on gasoline tax revenues. We may have to face the need to find another way to pay for highway maintenance other than gasoline taxes, because, if hybrid and electric cars become the norm, gasoline sales and the taxes derived from them will decline. Perhaps some method of paying for our highways will have to be based on miles driven rather than on fuel taxes. Time will tell. What do you think?

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