

# Clarion Ledger

## **We don't need higher gas taxes to fix potholes. We just need to stop wasting tax money**

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May 24, 2019

A lot of folks seem to want to raise gas taxes lately, in Jackson and Washington, D.C. Those folks are not listening to Mississippians like Hunter Abrams.

“I drive around 400 miles every week for work,” Abrams, who works in home health care, told me. “I get a mileage reimbursement, but that doesn't go up just because gas taxes go up. The increase would come out of my pocket. The government needs to do a better job of managing its money before it asks me to pay more.”

There's a proposal making the rounds in Washington to more than double the 18.4-cent per gallon federal gas tax to 43.4 cents per gallon, while in Mississippi some want to raise the state gas tax of 18 cents by as much as 15 cents. If both proposals were enacted, Mississippians like Hunter Abrams would pay a combined federal-state gas tax of 76.8 cents a gallon.

Such increases, state or federal, would hit our state especially hard.

According to 2016 data from the U.S. Energy Information Administration and Bureau of Economic Analysis, Mississippians spend a higher percentage of our per capita income on gas than any other state's residents – three times more than New Yorkers, for example.

There are two reasons for this. First, our population is not concentrated in large cities. We are spread out, so we drive a lot to get to our families, friends and workplaces. Second, we have one of the country's lowest per capita annual incomes, so the price of gas hits us harder.

Hiking gas taxes would worsen this already heavy burden. An April 2019 report from Freedom Partners and Americans for Prosperity found that a 25 cent federal gas tax increase would cost the average Mississippi household an additional \$380 per year. A 15-cent state gas tax increase would add another \$228. Together, that's an additional \$608 each year – just in new gas taxes. Including all existing motor fuel levies, the total annual gas tax bill for the typical Mississippi household would come to \$1,174.

The bigger question is whether a higher gas tax is necessary. Between 2011 and 2017, the Mississippi legislature appropriated more than \$7 billion for roads and bridges, and appropriated an additional \$2.6 billion just in the last two years. Continually asking taxpayers to fork over more isn't the answer. Instead, we should look to reforming transportation spending practices on both the state and federal levels.

Because Mississippi gets a large share of its transportation dollars from the federal government, both federal and state spending practices are relevant to the gas tax discussion.

Too much of the money collected in gas taxes is spent on wasteful, non-highway projects. At the federal level, about 29 percent of Highway Trust Fund money is diverted from roads and bridges to projects such as bike and pedestrian trails and beautification. Mississippi actually has a relatively low 11% diversion for gas taxes and vehicle fees, according to the Cato Institute. That still amounts to millions of dollars that should be spent on roads that is spent on something else.

And, MDOT spends on lowest-cost rather than best-value projects, while wasting money on illegitimate travel expenses and unreasonable vehicle fleet sizes.

At both the state and federal levels, even more resources are wasted on inflated costs that result from outdated regulatory burdens, a complex and sluggish permitting system and overly restrictive labor requirements.

Before demanding more from taxpayers, governments should first stop wasting the money they already get. I suspect that if they did that, they would find they don't really need more.