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OUR OPINION: Minnesota's highways may need 'VMT fees'

"A federal funding system based on more direct forms of 'user pay' charges, in the form of a charge for each mile driven (commonly referred to as a vehicle miles traveled or VMT fee system), has emerged as the consensus choice for the future," the national commission unanimously concluded.

Minnesota's highways aren't going to fix themselves.

They don't heal when holes are punched in them, and a few stitches aren't enough to mend cracks.

Instead, healing the "wounds" costs money — a lot of money. But money is catastrophically short.

What to do?

Cut costs, raise revenues and plan now to solve the funding problem over the next 20 years.

Minnesota's highways already are in tough shape, motorists know. The Twin Cities now ranks as one of the most traffic-jammed cities in America. And "state trunk highway conditions have deteriorated," with more roads being rated "poor" or "very poor" and fewer being rated "good," the legislative auditor has confirmed.

More alarmingly, the situation's going to get worse unless the state acts now. Minnesota is projected to spend \$15 billion on highways over the next 20 years, the transportation department reported.

But the state needs \$65 billion. That's a \$50 billion shortfall, a recipe for huge service declines.

Monday's editorial dealt with Part 1 of the answer: Cutting costs.

Now, about raising revenues:

A national consensus about paying for transportation infrastructure is becoming clear.

As one expert testified to a House committee, "there are few, if any, policy ideas that garner the support of the General Accountability Office, the Brookings Institute, the Washington Post and New York Times editorial pages, the Cato Institute, Environmental Defense, the National Resources Defense Council, the Reason Foundation, experts at USDOT and EPA and the president's budget, among others."

Congestion pricing is one such idea, and that's an avenue Minnesota should explore.

Congestion pricing simply means pricing a resource — in this case, access to highways — more in line with its costs, including the costs of traffic congestion.

So, motorists who use metro highways at peak times would be charged more for the privilege. This not only would raise revenue but also would keep some drivers off the road at those times, thereby reducing congestion.

The second tool to raise revenue doesn't have as broad a consensus. But given the size of America's infrastructure woes, it seems sure to gain support as well.

That support began snowballing earlier this year, when the National Surface Transportation Financing Commission released its final report.

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"The commission cast a wide net, reviewed many funding alternatives, and concluded that indeed the most viable approach ... will be a user charge system based more directly on miles driven (and potentially on factors such as time of day, type of road and vehicle weight and fuel economy) rather than indirectly on fuel consumed."

In fact, the commission recommends phasing out the gas tax in favor of a VMT fee system.

The report is available at financecommission.dot.gov. It addresses privacy, technology, implementation and other concerns.

And it offers a realistic way of paying for bridge and highway work for decades to come. That's a way forward for Minnesota and the rest of America alike.

— Tom Dennis for the Herald

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