

And gas tax for all

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It was only a few months ago that Vermonters were paying more than \$3 per gallon for gasoline. Just thinking about it makes our wallets hurt. And while we're grateful to see prices drop to a more reasonable level, at an average of \$2.27 per gallon statewide, gas still doesn't seem in any way cheap.

So why would we support a bid to raise Vermont's taxes on gasoline and diesel fuel by 6 cents a gallon?

There's one big reason: It would leverage a huge windfall in federal aid for roads, bridges and trains over the next five years.

That is why the House Transportation Committee voted 7-4 on Thursday in favor of the tax hike, with Rep. Timothy Corcoran II, D-Bennington, in the majority.

The hike is necessary to generate an additional \$24 million per year for the state to close a budget gap and invest in transportation projects. In return, Washington will contribute about \$66 million annually. That's money Sen. James Jeffords, I-Vt., helped to secure. You remember him. He's been instrumental in helping to pay for the Bennington Bypass.

Gov. James Douglas isn't happy about the Transportation Committee's stance. He, too, wants to leverage federal dollars. But he'd rather raise the \$24 million by increasing motor vehicle fees. That, however, would only generate \$10 million. Another \$14.6 million is to be transferred from the state's Education Fund to the Transportation Fund under the governor's plan.

What that means is that \$14.6 million now being spent to support Vermont's schools would have to be made up somehow. And there's nowhere to go but the property tax, according to Democratic leaders, who are opposed to raiding the Education Fund.

One of the attractions of turning to the gasoline and diesel tax is that the increase would also be paid by visitors to Vermont, not just those of us who live here. And for those of us who do use the roads daily, it seems fair that we contribute to their maintenance and improvement.

Fair, but not popular.

We can't imagine the proposed tax hike will play well politically with many of their constituents, but Corcoran and his allies on the Transportation Committee made the right move.

"We've got to be willing to stand up and take the static along with the praises," said Rep. Sonny Audette, D-South Burlington.

Well, here are the praises. Let's hope the Ways and Means Committee, which must make a final recommendation of its own, hears them through the static. And that the full House follows through.