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Cars with better mileage will dry up gas tax revenue, planners fear

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ARLINGTON -- It's a prickly problem.

Cars are getting better gas mileage, which reduces the impact on the environment and the amount people spend at the pump.

But it also means that states and the federal government are getting less money to fix highways and fund other transportation needs.

So what is a transportation planner to do?

One way to address the problem would be to allow the gas tax to gradually go up as vehicle fuel efficiency improves so that it continues to bring in the same amount of revenue. It's currently 38.4 cents per gallon in combined state and federal taxes.

But the taxes would have to nearly double to 74.5 cents per gallon by 2035 just to keep tax revenues at current levels, one official said.

A tax hit like that would be an extremely tough sell to the public, but it's one of several options transportation officials mulled over Thursday as they search for solutions to North Texas' chronic traffic problems.

Another option is to do nothing and allow Texas' roads and bridges to crumble from neglect, said Michael Morris, transportation director for the North Central Texas Council of Governments.

"I think under the status quo, some bridges could have to be closed," Morris said during a joint meeting of the Tarrant Regional Transportation Coalition and Dallas Regional Mobility Coalition. "I don't think there's enough revenue to maintain them through 2035."

The two groups met Thursday at Cowboys Stadium in Arlington to talk about financing options for projects planned through 2035 in Dallas-Fort Worth.

A tax on miles?

Federal fuel economy standards are making it harder for state officials to stretch their highway dollars.

A typical motorist who gets 18 miles per gallon today will likely get 35 mpg in 2035, Morris said.

At that rate, a motorist who travels 15,000 miles per year pays \$320 in taxes now but would pay only \$165 in 2035 unless state and federal officials agree to raise their tax rates, Morris said.

It's one reason that some transportation researchers have proposed eventually replacing the gas tax with a tax on the number of miles a car travels.

That option, which could include using technology to track cars' movements, has raised privacy concerns.

Public education

Members of the two groups, who advocate for road and rail improvements on the west and east sides of the Metroplex, say they're not sure how to get the public to fully grasp the consequences of delaying action on transportation problems. A crisis may be looming by 2035 or sooner, they say.

Since 1982, traffic in Dallas-Fort Worth has deteriorated more than in any other metro area in the U.S. except the greater Washington, D.C., area, according to the Texas Transportation Institute at Texas A&M University. Travelers on D-FW roads waste an average of 53 hours per year in gridlock, according to its 2009 urban mobility report.

Yet residents continue to resist proposals to develop toll roads, raise the gas tax or adopt a per-mile tax.

"We have to get more grassroots involvement from the people stuck on Interstate 635, Loop 820, you name it," North Richland Hills Mayor Oscar Trevino said.

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