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## Miles-traveled tax being scrutinized

[By Peggy Fikac](#) - Express-News

AUSTIN — If you don't like gasoline taxes, here's an alternative: a tax on the number of miles you drive in a year.

The Texas Transportation Commission has directed a fresh study of the idea, and it's not alone. There are pilot projects in other states and nationally to gauge how such a tax would work.

Texas transportation officials suggest it's meant to help give lawmakers information on funding options before their next regular session in 2011, when they confront a funding squeeze that's expected to drain the highway fund of money for new construction contracts by 2012.

“We need to think differently about how we fund transportation,” Texas Transportation Commission Chairwoman Deirdre Delisi said at a Texas Taxpayers and Research Association forum in November.

Delisi said the vehicle-miles-traveled tax idea is “controversial” but should be discussed because revenue from the state's main source of transportation funding, the motor fuels tax, is declining. The gasoline tax hasn't been raised since 1991.

The commission asked the Texas Transportation Institute, which is part of the Texas A&M University System, to take the lead on the study. Commissioner Fred Underwood has emphasized that the commission's goal is to give lawmakers alternatives.

“Let's just make sure that we give them options, not conclusions,” he said.

Texas Senate Transportation and Homeland Security Committee Chairman John Carona, R-Dallas, has said a gasoline tax increase is what makes sense to him, though that has proven politically difficult so far. He has suggested a vehicle-miles-traveled tax is “far into the future and way ahead of its time.”

Carona recently released a statement, however, that the vehicle-miles-traveled tax option is “not coming to a gas station near you anytime soon, but it also can't be dismissed out of hand.”

“If study can lead us to better funding mechanisms than we are currently using, and we can address the concerns, then we have an obligation to keep at it,” the statement said.

Just how a vehicle-miles-traveled tax would be assessed is part of the study. It could be as simple as drivers writing a check when they have their vehicles inspected to in-car technology that more precisely tracks mileage, perhaps tacking on a charge when drivers fuel up by communicating with the pump. This

could be through global positioning technology or other technology.

The latter system would allow for such things as different charges for rural versus urban driving, and for deductions when people travel out of state, noted Ginger Goodin, a Texas Transportation Institute research engineer who is leading the study. She said, however, that privacy concerns quickly arise when such a system is discussed.

“I think anywhere this has been discussed, that (privacy) is probably the issue that emerges among the top issues,” she said. “That will have to be addressed.”

The study will explore alternatives with technology experts, representatives of other states' transportation agencies and with the public through focus groups. The work will be forwarded to a yet-unnamed exploratory committee of business leaders or similar people to examine the policy implications.

One possibility is a Texas pilot project, Goodin said, adding, “We're just in the process of exploring whether it makes sense for Texas.”

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