

New taxes not needed for road improvements

By Andrea Seastrand

Former Congressional Representative, 22nd District

Look out, the Sacramento politicians are coming for your wallet once again. Gov. Jerry Brown and many state legislators want to raise gas taxes and vehicle license fees by billions of dollars to pay for transportation repairs and improvements. And unfortunately, the San Luis Obispo Council of Governments (SLOCOG) politicians voted 9-2 to support raising those state taxes and fees.

Everyone agrees that state politicians have for decades neglected to make much-needed infrastructure improvements. Eighty-seven percent of California's roads are in fair or poor condition, according to Senate Bill 1, which seeks an annual \$6 billion increase in transportation taxes and fees. California faces an estimated \$132 billion deferred maintenance backlog over the next 10 years.

In addition to the tax and fee hikes in SB1, Brown's proposed budget and Infrastructure Plan seek \$4.3 billion annually for transportation improvements with the help of a \$65 motorist fee increase and a gas tax hike. And Assembly Bill 1 seeks \$6 billion in gas tax and vehicle fee hikes for transportation improvements.

But while everyone agrees that state leaders have dropped the ball, and more money needs to be spent on road improvements, there is a major disagreement on whether taxes and fees need to be raised to provide the extra funding. California is not impoverished – it has the sixth largest economy in the world, and state government spends nearly \$180 billion annually.

State government doesn't have a revenue problem, it has a problem prioritizing its spending. Nearly 55% of the \$122.5 billion General Fund portion of the budget goes to education, nearly 28% for health and human services and 9% for prisons. Transportation amounts to a paltry 0.2% of General Fund spending. It comprises 6.3% of the overall budget, but only

\$3.6 billion is spent on transportation capital outlay projects in the current budget.

There is money available in the state budget that could and should be used to shore up our infrastructure. Which is why the Central Coast Taxpayers Association opposed the Measure J 1/2% transportation sales tax that was defeated on the November ballot. Californians already pay some of the highest taxes in the nation, we don't need more.

Instead we should support legislation such as Assembly Bill 496 by Assemblyman Vince Fong, R-Bakersfield. It would provide \$2.2 billion in one-time funding and \$5.6 billion annually for transportation infrastructure, including 30% dedicated to new roads and road widening – without raising taxes or fees. It would require that all of the transportation-related taxes and fees we are already paying be spent on transportation rather than being siphoned off to other government programs. For example, \$1 billion in truck weight fees are currently going into the General Fund.

“Every dollar that we pay for in gas tax, diesel tax, vehicle license fee, car insurance, buying a new car, buying a used car, every dollar that we already pay for, should be dedicated to transportation,” Fong said in a KERN radio interview. “I want a debate about budget priorities. In the last six years the General Fund has increased over \$36 billion, and zero dollars of that \$36 billion has gone to transportation infrastructure.”

Eighty-seven percent of Californians believe state legislators are not spending enough time on fixing highways, roads and bridges, according to a recent California Chamber of Commerce survey. Nearly four out of five rate the state's transportation infrastructure as fair or poor. And 80% say the solution should be through better management of current state funds.

Despite Democrats having a super-majority in the state Legislature, it's not certain that either AB1 or SB1 will get the required two-thirds approval to pass. Gas taxes and vehicle fees are regressive, hurting low-income Californians the most. Some Democrats at the Senate Transportation Committee hearing on SB1 expressed concern that the bill further discriminates against the poor by increasing the vehicle license fee hike less on electrical vehicle owners (\$100 versus \$240 for gas vehicles), although

electric vehicles tend to be owned by wealthier motorists.

The politicians are coming for your wallet, but you don't have to let them take it. Tell them to spend the taxes and fees you're already paying before seeking more of your hard-earned dollars.