



TESTIMONY

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FUNDING THE STATE HIGHWAY SYSTEM WITH INCREASED FUEL TAXES

By Joseph Miller

Testimony Before the Senate Transportation,
Infrastructure and Public Safety Committee

TO THE HONORABLE MEMBERS OF THIS COMMITTEE:

My name is Joseph Miller, and I am a policy analyst for the Show-Me Institute, a nonprofit, nonpartisan, Missouri-based think tank that supports free-market solutions for state and local policy. The ideas presented here are my own. This testimony is intended to summarize research that analysts for the Show-Me Institute have conducted and reviewed regarding proposals to fund the state highway system and the use of fuel taxes for that purpose. Upon the legislature's approval, Missouri Senate Bill 623 (SB 623) would increase the state's regular fuel tax by 1.5 cents per gallon and the state's diesel fuel tax by 3.5 cents per gallon, to 18.8 and 20.8 cents per gallon, respectively. After all of the increases take effect, total state revenue would increase

by an additional \$80 million dollars annually, 70% of which (\$56 million) would go to the Missouri Department of Transportation (MoDOT) and 30% of which (\$24 million) would go to cities and counties.¹

In recent decades, Missouri's state highway system has improved both in terms of quality and safety, and ranks well against other states on many performance measures.² To maintain and improve this system in the future, Missouri will have to make timely infrastructure investments. However, MoDOT, the agency tasked with building and maintaining most of our state's transportation infrastructure, has an unsustainable funding trajectory. Despite cuts to staff and other cost-saving measures, funds available for MoDOT's construction projects have been cut considerably in past years, preventing the department from adding any new projects to the

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State Transportation Improvement Program (STIP). In the near future, MoDOT's construction budget may fall below what the agency claims it will need to maintain the system in its current condition.³

MoDOT's funding model has broken down primarily because at both the federal and state levels, the gas tax has not increased. Today, approximately 66 percent of the dedicated funding for state roadways comes from state and federal gas tax proceeds.⁴ The gas tax in Missouri has remained at 17 cents per gallon since 1996, and the federal gas tax has not changed since 1994.⁵ If we account for inflation, Missouri's gas tax has lost a third of its purchasing power. At the same time, road design specifications have improved and material costs have increased faster than inflation, making project construction more expensive.⁶ In addition, higher fuel efficiency in motor vehicles means that Missourians "consume" more road (through wear and tear caused by their vehicles) while paying less tax. Therefore, MoDOT has seen its costs rise and its revenues fall.

MoDOT avoided having to deal with funding issues during the last decade because Amendment 3 to the Missouri Constitution authorized billions of dollars in bonds, and the state received federal stimulus dollars.⁷ Thus, MoDOT could increase its transportation spending even as its long-term tax base eroded. Essentially, Missouri drivers received new or repaired roads and bridges without being asked to create a system to pay for their construction or long-term maintenance.

The best policy moving forward is for Missouri to modernize its user pay model so that it can fund necessary transportation infrastructure into the future. Unlike general taxes, which are not tied to use, fuel taxes represent indirect user fees, as the gas tax charges drivers who actually use the roads. According to the state constitution, virtually all proceeds from the gas tax at the state and local levels must be spent on roads. Under these circumstances, the gas tax creates a connection between funding for roads and the demand for roads. If the gas tax is at an adequate level, as Missourians drive more, MoDOT will receive more money to maintain and construct highways. User-fee solutions include raising the gas tax, as SB 623 would, but also tolls on major roads and bridges throughout the state.

The gasoline tax in Missouri is relatively low compared to those in other states. As of Jan. 1, 2016, Missouri had the fifth lowest gasoline tax and the fourth lowest diesel fuel tax in the nation.⁸ Among its neighbors, Missouri has the second lowest fuel tax. Oklahoma, the only neighboring state with a lower fuel tax (17 cents per gallon), makes extensive use of tolling.⁹

While having a low tax is not a bad thing, it is irresponsible when the expenditures it is designed to cover are being paid for through debt and federal aid. Furthermore, raising the gas tax is a feasible solution to MoDOT's funding problems.

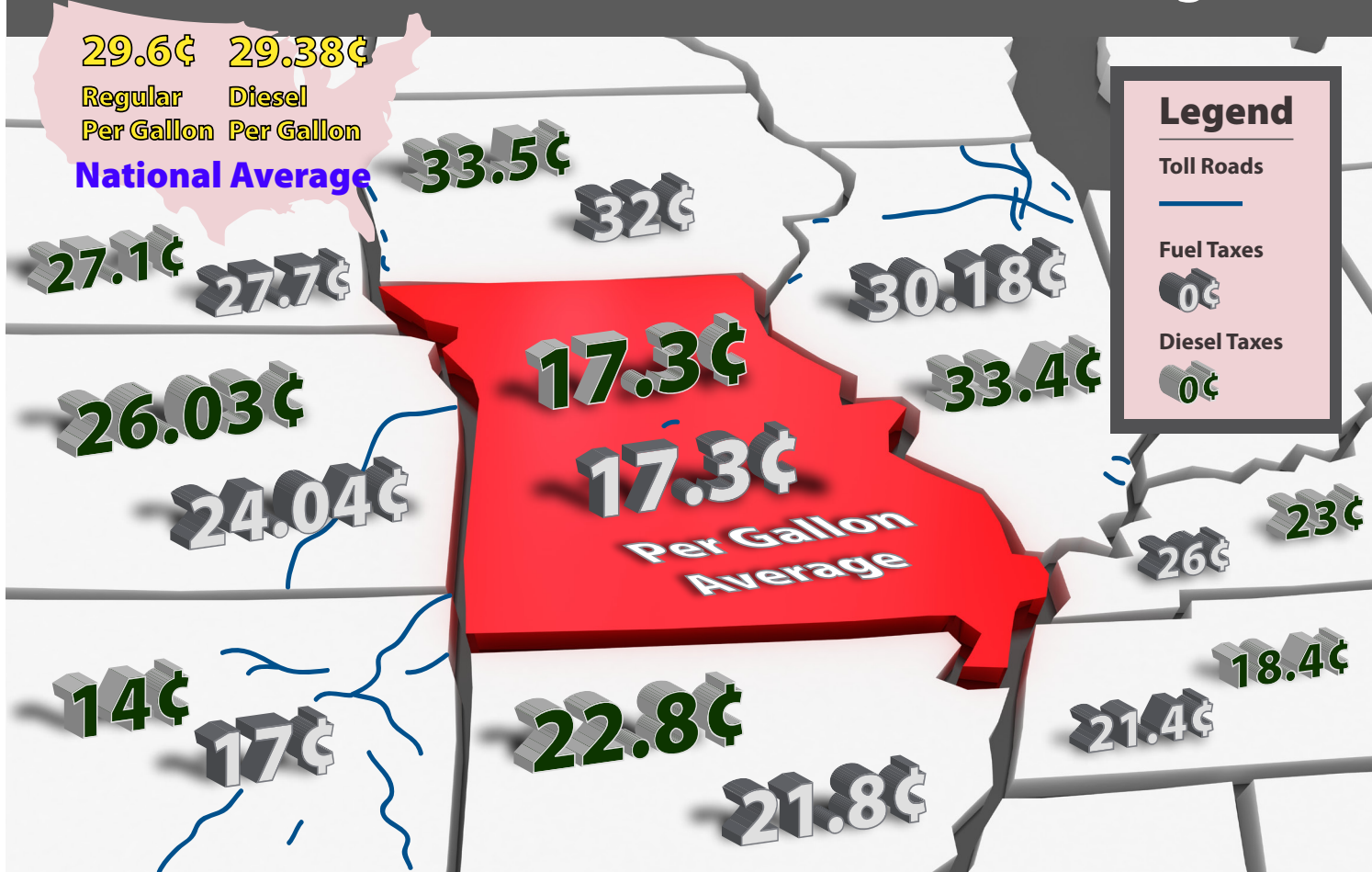
The decline in the effectiveness of gas taxes can be overstated. Missouri's total fuel consumption has only

decreased very slowly over the last decade, and actually increased by 0.171% in 2014 and by 2.1% in 2015.¹⁰ If current trends hold, fuel taxes can provide an adequate user funding base for MoDOT over the next decade. Furthermore, fuel taxes also have the advantage of being the simplest option for the legislature to take, as it may raise this tax by around 2 to 3 cents immediately without having to go to a vote of the people under Hancock provisions.¹¹ It is possible that SB 623 would not trigger Hancock provisions.

Over the long term, using gasoline taxes to fund road infrastructure may not be the best model.¹² But for now and the near future, gas taxes remain an effective way of funding transportation in Missouri. The limited increases proposed in SB 623 may not be adequate to ensure Missouri can match federal dollars. Furthermore, the additional \$24 million that local cities and counties receive must also be spent on their local road needs, which are for the most part in a much worse state of repair than the state highway system.^{13,14}

While the fuel tax increase contained in SB 623 would lessen cuts to MoDOT, it would be unlikely to provide adequate funding for the department's more expensive projects. That being the case, the state could also explore tolling as a solution. Missouri does not currently toll any highways. Tolling connects the act of using the road, bridge, or port to the method of paying for it. In 2008, the Show-Me Institute released a policy study examining how tolling could increase the use of

Fuel Taxes and Toll Roads: Missouri and Its Neighbors



public-private partnerships (PPPs) in addressing Missouri’s transportation needs.¹⁵ Tolling will not be the right solution for many of the transportation needs that the state faces, but for some larger projects, tolling could provide the necessary financing in a fair and economically sound manner. Tolling the highways that are more expensive to build and maintain could free up state funding for other projects, allowing existing taxes to go further.

For example, MoDOT’s proposals for replacing and expanding I-70 are expected to cost anywhere from \$2 to \$4 billion depending on the final design.¹⁶ Barring a very large

increase in general taxes or fuel taxes, that level of investment might be beyond the financial capabilities of MoDOT. However, paying for the replacement of I-70 with tolls would allow the state to immediately bond against future toll revenue to pay for the project. The construction cost could then be recouped from those who directly benefit from the highway, and in proportion to their benefit. In other states, anywhere from one-third to one-half of such revenue is derived from trucks, which do disproportionate damage to the roadway. Other large projects aside from I-70 could also be rebuilt using tolls, including the \$200 million

plan to improve the aging Broadway Bridge in Kansas City, which itself operated as a toll bridge from 1956 to 1991.¹⁷

Tolling does not just provide the means to build better infrastructure; it also creates a reliable user-based revenue stream for regular maintenance. When toll road revenue is spent, most states prioritize toll road improvements before diverting funds to the rest of the highway system or mass transit. As a result, major toll roads averaged over \$100,000 of maintenance spending per mile in 2011. Missouri’s interstates receive less than \$50,000 per mile.¹⁸

Toll roads can also be used to control congestion and promote traffic-free movement on Missouri's highways. New toll roads use open-road tolling technology, allowing drivers with multi-state compatible transponders to pay tolls without ever stopping at a booth, eliminating a source of traffic that once characterized toll roads.¹⁹ Furthermore, many states, like California and Virginia, use variable pricing on some of their toll roads to guarantee free-flowing traffic, even during rush hour.²⁰ When traffic begins to increase on the road, prices increase to ensure free flow; prices fall when traffic does. A study on high-occupancy toll lanes in California found that tolls tend to push non-work-related traffic to non-rush-hour periods, giving quicker rides to higher time-opportunity cost travel.^{21, 22} If Missouri used variable price tolls on its highways in major cities, it could use road pricing to encourage rush hour free flow.

Some argue that general taxes should be used to pay for roads because we all benefit from goods moving on state highways. While infrastructure investment creates indirect benefits, there is no reason that benefit cannot be internalized into the cost of goods. For example, trucks are needed to deliver goods to consumers, even to those consumers who rarely drive on the roads. By increasing the cost of transporting these goods, which an increase in gasoline taxes or tolling would do, the sellers of these goods can pass some of this cost increase onto consumers.²³ Thus, these consumers, who could derive indirect benefits from increased infrastructure

investment, will indirectly pay for the investment. In addition, SB 623 would raise diesel fuel taxes more than it would raise regular fuel taxes, which would in part correct for the disproportionate damage large trucks do to highways in comparison to passenger vehicles.

The proposed increases in SB 623 do not appear unreasonable. Fuel tax revenue is derived from the users of roads, and in proportion to their use. The additional revenue at the state level may be able to prevent budget shortfalls, and cities and counties will also be able to spend more on deteriorating roads. However, raising the fuel tax does place a larger tax burden on Missouri residents. MoDOT should make efforts to reduce waste and increase efficiency so that Missourians can be sure their hard-earned tax dollars are well spent. Furthermore, this increase in the fuel tax will not be sufficient to fully modernize the state highway system. As those expensive improvement projects become necessary, the state should continue looking for market-based solutions for highway funding. Passing an increase in the fuel tax should not be the end of the conversation on how to provide sustainable funding for one of the state's most important assets.

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ENDNOTES

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