

Idahoans willing to tax the other guy for roads

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Five years ago, Idaho Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter's fellow Republicans in the Legislature slaughtered his signature highway funding package.

We've been looking over the corpse ever since.

This week delivered yet another autopsy.

The University of Idaho's McClure Center survey Otter requested says people understand the need to invest in the state's highways and bridges. Otter's own task force found the state was falling \$262 million short of maintaining infrastructure annually and that was four years ago.

But are they willing to pay for it?

Not yet.

Raise registration fees? The McClure Center found a narrow 56 percent majority in favor - but the bulk of support is lukewarm.

How about the one sure way of generating more money - charging more at the pump? That gets only 35 percent.

Charge sales taxes on fuel? Support drops to 32 percent.

Toll roads? That's OK with 27 percent.

How about a mileage-based fee that would more fairly tax people who drive electric and hybrid cars? No better than 23 percent.

McClure found 73 percent like the idea of taking sales taxes from purchases people make on automotive products.

Sounds good in principle until you realize that plugging a \$262 million highway funding gap with sales taxes means raiding the public education budget by the same amount.

How long do you think it will take parents to start screaming about how Idaho's schools have yet to recover from the Great Recession and how their state now has the distinction of the lowest per-pupil expenditures in the United States?

Squeezing truckers has 68 percent support. And why not? When the government contractor Battelle looked at Idaho's highway cost allocation, it learned passenger car and pickup truck drivers are overcharged 26 percent, while semi-truck operators are undercharged 27 percent.

Truckers got that sweet deal because they have clout with lawmakers. They aren't likely to cede it.

On the other hand, AAA went one step further than McClure - it put together specific dollars and cents and then asked Idahoans: How much were they willing to pay?

Assume most people drive 12,000 miles a year and get 20 miles to the gallon. A nickel-per-gallon fuel tax increase would cost them about \$30 more a year.

When you put it that way, about 75 percent are willing to go along, AAA said.

But both surveys reached the same conclusion: Idahoans can be persuaded.

AAA found Idahoans evenly split - 47 percent for, 47 percent against - on new taxes.

McClure found about 37 percent of Idahoans hold conflicting views: They want their transportation network maintained, but suspect the government will waste or misuse increased taxes.

But who is going to break this gridlock?

No state legislator commands the confidence.

No special interest lobby - whether it's contractors or truckers - has the credibility.

This is a job for a governor, but Otter has shied away from this cause ever since his 2009 debacle.

On his watch, Idaho has become quite adroit at defining the scope of its highway problem.

But the state is no closer to solving it. - M.T.