

# Conservatives warming to gas taxes

**Chuck Malloy/Idaho Political Weekly (via Lewiston Tribune)**

Republican Reps. Joe Palmer of Meridian and Paul Shepherd of Riggins are hardline conservatives and proud of it.

But when it comes to upgrading infrastructure, they are willing to put all ideas on the table - including raising the gas tax, if necessary.

Palmer, who chairs the House Transportation Committee, says he'd take a tax bill to the floor if that ends up being the Legislature's end game.

Shepherd, the committee's vice-chairman, said he'd be willing to go along.

Raising the gas tax isn't their first option. Palmer, who would like to raise \$100 million to \$200 million, wants some of that money to come from the general fund or raising registration fees. From there, he said, a fuel tax is on the table.

"The fuel tax is the best, the most fair and the right way to pay for transportation," Palmer said. "I am committed to doing things I would not normally do ... because I am worried about our infrastructure. If we lose our infrastructure, we are going to go backwards really fast and the whole economy will fall apart."

Shepherd says he's no fan of tax increases, "but we have to face reality."

According to a governor's task force, Idaho has a \$543 million annual shortfall in transportation. Of that, \$262 million is needed annually just to maintain the system that's in place.

Brian Ness, director of the Idaho Transportation Department, says the state is losing the battle keeping up with bridges. By 2019, he said, 908 bridges - or nearly half the bridges on the state highway system - will be more than 50 years old.

To Palmer, the unhealthy infrastructure amounts to "impeding commerce." He views road and bridge maintenance as a proper role for government, "and a lot of what we do is not the proper role for government."

For Palmer and Shepherd, the openness to raise fuel taxes is a reversal of their previous stands on the fuel tax. They were opposed to Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter's call for a 2-cent increase - saying a tax increase of any kind was not the right message to send during a down economy. The economy is better now and, as leaders of the committee, they have different perspectives.

Few legislators have changed more dramatically than Palmer, who seemed to have no vision of becoming one of the movers and shakers of the Legislature when he took office six years ago. But his world changed at the end of the 2011 session when then-Speaker Lawrence Denney

invited Palmer to dinner with "a few friends." Palmer was told (not asked) that he would become the committee's chairman, replacing Leon Smith.

A nice dinner was on Palmer's plate, but he would have been just as fine with Tums. Up to that time, he rarely stood up for floor debate in the House, and the thought of presiding over any committee - let alone a high profile committee such as Transportation - was daunting to him.

The fear factors went away a long time ago. Palmer has taken the assignment seriously and he spends countless hours discussing issues with Ness and Mollie McCarty, ITD's director of governmental affairs. Their responsiveness have made points with Palmer.

"Five years ago, we did not have the same transportation department as we do now. There was no faith and confidence in the leadership," he said. "We have a leader (in Ness) who is top-notch. I feel more comfortable asking taxpayers to foot the bill when their house is in order."

Palmer said for his part, he's putting in a lot of airline (he's a pilot) and vehicle miles, traveling the state and seeing conditions for himself.

"I can truthfully tell the people of Idaho that I hold that department accountable," Palmer said. "I'm on the phone three times a week at the minimum and, during the session, it's two or three times a day."

Ness says he welcomes the communication and the accountability. Six years ago, he was 2,000 miles away in Michigan when Idaho was debating Otter's gas tax proposal. Since coming aboard five years ago, Ness says he has worked to change the culture of the department.

"I made it clear I would not ask for a tax increase unless I could assure that every penny was being spent wisely, and I think we've done that over the past five years," Ness said.

Selling Palmer and Shepherd on even the remote possibility of raising the fuel tax may be one of Ness' biggest accomplishments.

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