

# When Idaho says freeway, it means free ride

**Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune**

When it comes to the neglect of Idaho's highways and bridges, good luck figuring out who appears more irresponsible:

The politicians who are doing nothing.

Or the citizens of this state who apparently are just fine with that.

For 20 years, Idaho governors and lawmakers failed to raise more money for transportation. So by the time they got serious two years ago, they faced a yearly \$262 million shortfall on maintenance alone.

They raised gas taxes by 7 cents a gallon and most registration fees by \$21. Despite his threat to veto any plan that raided general fund dollars meant for education and other programs, Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter also agreed to siphon off a portion of "surplus" funds to pay for two years of highway projects.

It was supposedly a down payment.

That's taking the charitable view.

As Otter noted this month, the state is still about \$200 million short of meeting its annual needs.

Lawmakers did nothing to ease the unfair burden on ordinary motorists - who paid nearly three-quarters of the new taxes and fees.

Meanwhile, long-haul truckers continue to profit from a registration system that undercharges them. Until lawmakers impose a tax system based on the amount of weight transported and the distanced traveled, the industry will continue to grind up Idaho's roads without paying its full share.

As the government contractor

Battelle documented, passenger car and pickup truck drivers are overcharged 26 percent; semi-truck operators are undercharged 27 percent.

The politicians have promised to address that inequity, but don't hold your breath. Remember, these are the same legislators who have agreed to allow even heavier loads to be carried down Idaho's interstates and highways.

Not much has happened since. Nor is it likely to. Otter offered no solution to the problem he outlined. Lawmakers aren't even talking about transportation. Why should they?

When the latest Idaho Public Policy Survey from Boise State University asked people what they cared about, they replied schools, health care, the economy, natural resources and even tax cuts.

Highways and bridges?

That came in nearly last.

It's not as if people don't see a problem. According to BSU, 51 percent rate Idaho's infrastructure as poor to fair. But they're in no mood to pay for it:

- When asked about shelling out more in fuel taxes and registration fees, 56.4 percent said no - including 32.6 percent who basically said: Hell no.

- How about raiding the general fund? The rejection rate on that was 62.1 percent, including 42.2 percent who said they strongly opposed the idea.
- OK, why not take some of the state lottery profits now going to school construction? Nope, said 61.1 percent.

What would they support?

BSU's survey says 71.1 percent would support reauthorizing the "surplus eliminator." Of course that takes money from the general fund - which nearly two-thirds already opposed. Perhaps they were confused by a less-than-precise question.

There's also a plurality - 48.6 percent - who wouldn't mind bonding on tomorrow's highway receipts to pay for today's repairs.

Not that anything here is shockingly new. When the University of Idaho's McClure Center and AAA conducted their own surveys in a run-up to the 2015 legislative session, they found the same ambivalence: Idahoans wanted better roads without paying for them.

About the only silver lining was an electorate that might be persuaded.

But who's been busy persuading them?

Otter? Lawmakers? The transportation department? Road construction contractors?

Whatever momentum the idea had two years ago has been squandered. If the stalemate isn't broken this year, you can bet on nothing happening in 2018, which is another election year.

Face it: Idaho is driving down the path of least resistance - and dodging a lot of potholes along the way. - M.T.