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Focus where Otter's task force hasn't - yet

- **August 12th, 2009**
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Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter's latest highway funding initiative got a friendly lift-off last week.

Otter said nice things about his 15-member Task Force on Modernizing Transportation Funding. Members reiterated the themes Otter has been promoting throughout two years of failed attempts to raise gas taxes and registration fees.

What wasn't discussed, however, will decide the outcome.

For instance, a 2007 study reported Idaho's passenger car drivers were subsidizing heavy truckers. Ordinary drivers who are responsible for \$297 million in highway expenses are paying \$305 million. Professional truckers cause \$433 million worth of highway wear and tear. The industry pays \$327 million.

Correct that imbalance and you'd go a long way toward fixing the hole in Idaho's highway budget.

Former Transportation Department Director Pam Lowe yanked the study, contending the research was flawed. But the findings were consistent with other reviews. The National Cooperative Highway Research program found 19 of 22 states charge passenger car drivers too much and truckers too little.

Lowe ordered a new investigation. Key to its success is an objective and thorough review. Otter has suggested substantially boosting the registration fees Idahoans pay. Last year, he sought to raise them about 120 percent versus 5 percent for the trucking industry. Without a fair and credible cost-allocation study, however, registration fee hikes will remain frozen.

Nobody expects this panel to reach conclusions before its December 2010 deadline - safely past the general election. But the group could help reverse the damage done earlier this year when lawmakers and Otter sought a way out of their highway funding standoff.

Their \$56 million funding package siphoned \$21 million in fuel tax and registration fee revenues from Idaho State Police and the Parks and Recreation Department. It's a small sliver of the transportation budget. But ISP could lose 70 percent of its highway patrol budget. Parks and Recreation would lose all the money the agency has available for trail maintenance.

Otherwise, ISP and Parks and Rec will be forced to compete for a share of state dollars that now go toward public schools, social programs and colleges and universities.

While an eight-member legislative panel reviews the matter, Otter's transportation task force could support repealing the funding raid when the Legislature convenes next January. That would signal the panel is serious about making transformational change, not stop-gap measures.

Ultimately, the task force has 18 months to accomplish what Otter could not: persuade ordinary Idahoans they've got to cough up more money for highways and bridges. The unenviable public relations chore falls to Lt. Gov. Brad Little, who is chairing the group.

It's the challenge - and the opportunity - of a lifetime. Hanging in the balance is whether Little can demonstrate that he could one day serve effectively as governor. - M.T.