

Too early for tax on miles driven

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Express-News Editorial Board -

There may be a time when a tax on miles driven in Texas becomes both practical and necessary. Now is not that time.

As the Express-News reported, the Texas Transportation Commission has requested the Texas Transportation Institute to study the possibility of replacing the current motor fuels tax — the primary source of highway construction funds — with a tax on vehicle-miles driven. Pilot projects on a vehicle-miles-traveled tax are already under way in other states.

The economic downturn and higher fuel efficiency has led to a decline in revenues from the motor fuels tax. “We need to think differently about how we fund transportation,” commission Chairwoman Deirdre Delisi told the newspaper.

Delisi is correct. But a tax on miles driven — which raises all sorts of issues related to fairness, compliance, technology and privacy — shouldn't be considered until less-controversial and more common-sense steps are taken to address the chronic underfunding of transportation infrastructure in Texas.

The first step is to end legislative diversions of the supposedly dedicated highway fund for nonhighway uses. During the last biennium, more than one-third of the highway fund was allocated for other purposes.

Ending the diversions doesn't come close to solving the Lone Star State's road construction funding shortfall, estimated at \$8 billion annually. But it is the necessary precondition for the second step — raising the gas tax to a level that actually generates the revenues Texas needs for transportation infrastructure and then indexing the tax to inflation. The state gas tax has stood at 20 cents per gallon since 1991.

This isn't rocket science. But it does require the fortitude in Austin to level with taxpayers and spend dedicated funds on the purposes for which they were created.

The Texas Transportation Commission's premature move to consider a controversial levy on miles driven only proves that it's easier to order a study at taxpayer expense than it is for some politicians to find their spines.

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