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U.S. Transportation Secretary LaHood Signs $900 Million Agreement to Fund Wiehle Avenue Extension of Dulles Corridor Metrorail Project

03-10-09
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WASHINGTON—U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood today committed $900 million in U.S. Department of Transportation funds through 2016 to the $3.1 billion Wiehle Avenue Extension of the Dulles Corridor Metrorail Project. Participating in the full funding grant agreement ceremony at Transportation headquarters were Secretary LaHood, Governor Tim Kaine, Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority (MWAA) Chairman H.R. Crawford, members of the Virginia congressional delegation and other MWAA officials.

"This project comes at a pivotal point as the Obama Administration begins to make vast improvements to our nation's top transit systems," Secretary LaHood said. "It will create construction jobs, encourage economic development opportunities, and help Tysons Corner become a more livable community."

"On behalf of the Airports Authority board of directors, I want to thank all of our partners who have worked so hard to make this project happen," Crawford said. "This is one of the most important transportation projects to be developed in this region and will finally extend Metrorail along the Dulles Corridor and help relieve traffic congestion in Northern Virginia."

The 11.7-mile heavy rail line will be an extension to the existing Metrorail system just east of the West Falls Church station through Tysons Corner to its terminus at Wiehle Ave. in Reston, Va. The Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority will operate the line from the Stadium-Armory station in Washington to Wiehle Ave. MWAA plans to design and construct a second phase, which will extend the line beyond Dulles Airport into Loudoun County.

When complete, this project will consist of five new stations, improvements to an existing rail yard, 64 new rail cars, and 2,300 parking spaces at the Wiehle Ave. station. The Metrorail project would expand capacity to and from Reston and the Tysons Corner regional activity centers, and provide a direct rail link for commuters from northwest Fairfax and Loudoun Counties to employment opportunities in Tysons Corner, the Rosslyn-Ballston corridor, and downtown Washington.

The extension is projected to serve 85,700 daily riders by 2030, including an estimated 10,000 new daily transit riders.

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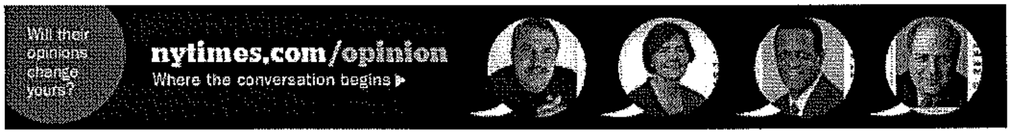

Officials Seek Way to Fill a Gas Tax Gap

By STEVE FRIESS
Published: March 7, 2009

LAS VEGAS — With gas tax revenue declining and fuel efficiency the holy grail of car manufacturers, officials across the country are testing systems that could move Americans from paying a per-gallon tax at the pump to some form of fee based on road usage.

The challenges with such a shift are immense. Economists are not sure the idea will be practical, and privacy advocates oppose the notion of governments monitoring motorists' driving habits. But millions of dollars are being spent on experiments with ways to collect such fees, and the idea seems to be gaining support in some quarters.

"We're anticipating that we may get to the day when cars on the road don't ever even go to a fueling station," said Representative Peter A. DeFazio, an Oregon Democrat and chairman of the House Subcommittee on Highways and Transit, which held hearings on the matter last summer. "If we're going to continue to have a highway network and fix the 150,000 bridges we have that are in disrepair, we're going to need new sources of revenue."

Gas tax revenue has been flat or declining across the nation, partly because people are driving less and partly because their cars require less fuel. The Department of Transportation took in about $71 million less in gas taxes in the 2008 fiscal year than in 2007, and Americans drove 12.9 billion fewer miles in November 2008 than November 2007, the most recent figures available.

Those declines have depleted the Federal Highway Trust Fund, authorized by Congress in 2005 to pay for road construction and maintenance through the end of this year. The federal tax rate of 18.4 cents per gallon of gas has not changed since 1993; 24 states and the District of Columbia have not changed their per-gallon tax rates since 1998.

The matter bubbled up at the White House recently after President Obama's transportation secretary, Ray LaHood, said the administration was considering some form of a "vehicles miles traveled" tax to replace the federal fuel tax. Mr. Obama's press secretary, Robert Gibbs, corrected Mr. LaHood, telling reporters at his daily briefing the next day that supporting such a tax "is not and will not be the policy of the Obama administration."

Still, studies of variations of a mileage tax are being conducted. In the largest experiment of its type, the $16.5 million federal Road User Study, more than 1,200 volunteers in six cities are driving cars equipped with tracking devices to record where motorists have been. The drivers pay the traditional gas tax when they fill up, but they also receive

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simulated bills each month based on mileage, showing how such a system may work.

"We're looking at how you would bill people, at invasion of privacy issues, and, human nature being what it is, people will always be looking at ways to beat the system," said Jon Kuhl, principal investigator for the Road User Study, which is using volunteers in Austin, Tex.; Baltimore; Boise, Idaho; Raleigh and Durham, N.C.; San Diego; and the Quad Cities region of Iowa.

In a $2.7 million field test that ended in 2007, Oregon officials equipped the cars of 299 volunteers with transponders that relayed mileage data to special gas pumps. The pump charged the drivers 1.2 cents per mile in lieu of the 24-cent per gallon state gas tax. Gov. Theodore R. Kulongoski, a Democrat, has asked the Legislature to approve $10 million to refine the technology and conduct more field tests.

Others are also tinkering with the idea. The North Carolina Legislature is considering adding a fee of one-quarter of a cent per mile to the state's current tax of 30.2 cents per gallon. The mileage fee would be paid with the annual vehicle registration fee.

In Massachusetts, Gov. Deval Patrick, a Democrat, is considering a similar fee that would replace the gas tax. The Nevada Transportation Department is spending $200,000 on a study before deciding whether to ask the Legislature to authorize a trial in 2011 in which some motorists would be charged a mileage tax instead of the gas tax.

Nevada plans to study the feasibility of charging motorists more for driving on the interstate during rush hour than on a surface street at midnight as a way to encourage alternative routes and carpooling. Mr. Kuhl of the Road User Study and other supporters of a mileage tax contend that motorists in many regions, including the New York metropolitan area, may buy their gas in one state but do much of their driving in another.

"We're seeing more fuel-efficient cars or even cars that run on electricity," said Susan Martinovich, director of the Nevada Department of Transportation. "Those people are not paying as much, and yet they're still on the road and still causing congestion and impacting pavement. How do I get at those people?"

Privacy advocates and economists, though, wonder about the complexity — and the public's reaction to tracking where and when people drive.

"You'd have to have a record where the car is at all times, and that certainly would frighten America," said Mike Moffatt, an economist at the Ivy School of Business at the University of Western Ontario. "And it also seems like a much more expensive way to collect taxes."

Despite the problems, some move to replace or supplement the gas tax seems inevitable. Mr. Kuhl envisions retrofitting vehicles with a transponder to measure miles traveled, but Jim Whitty, the Oregon transportation official who oversaw the 2007 pilot program, said it was more practical to require automakers to install them in new cars and start the switch with those owners.

Mr. Kuhl said: "Moving to a system like this is going to be an enormously complicated process. It's going to require huge amounts of planning."

A version of this article appeared in print on March 8, 2009, on page A22 of the New York edition.

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March 12, 2009

Agency halts cities from trading funds

Federal stimulus money designated for transit projects

By Jennifer Steinhauer

NEW YORK TIMES NEWS SERVICE
2:00 a.m. March 12, 2009

LOS ANGELES – Suppose the federal government gave you and your neighbor $500 each to buy a new bike, but what you really wanted was a $250 shopping spree for running gear instead. So you offered to sell your $500 federal check to your neighbor for $250 in cash so everyone's dreams could be realized.

That's essentially what several cities in Los Angeles County planned to do with federal stimulus money, until the local transportation authority, its face slightly reddened, pulled the plug on the plans. A spokeswoman in Washington for the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure said yesterday that the swaps would be illegal.

"We have already put governors, transit agencies and large metropolitan planning associations on notice that we intend to aggressively oversee that the funding is utilized as Congress intended," spokeswoman Mary Kerr said.

Under the federal stimulus package intended to improve the nation's infrastructure, the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transit Authority was set to give out $215 million in sums of at least $500,000 each to the county's 88 cities to get their projects moving.

Many cities on the list, however, didn't have qualifying projects because they're too small or can't move as quickly as the stimulus law stipulated. So the transit agency encouraged the cities to do with the stimulus money what they often do with other money – swap it with other cities at a discounted rate.

In a letter to city officials, the transit agency provided a list of cities that wouldn't be able to use their allocation. Last week, when the financing streams were announced, cities, many of them facing deficits and hard choices, moved to exchange the transportation money for cash, at about 62 cents on the dollar.

Irwindale, which has about 1,500 residents, agreed to sell its $500,000 allocation to the city of Westlake Village – 9,000 residents – for $310,000 in cash, which would go into Irwindale's general fund. "We have a general-fund deficit this year," said Robert Griego, city manager of Irwindale, which got offers from a half-dozen cities for its money. "So we probably would have used it to avoid people getting laid off."

Torrance, a city in southern Los Angeles County, moved to snap up transportation dollars to spruce up major arteries, and planned to buy a $500,000 share from Bradbury, another small city, for about $315,000. "We thought it was kosher," said Eric Tsao, city finance director.

But when the exchanges were brought to light Monday by The San Gabriel Valley Tribune, the transit agency quickly intervened. It sent letters to cities clarifying that the only swapping allowed would be federal money for equal amounts of state transportation funding. Congress and the Obama administration – criticized for approving a spending bill peppered with lawmakers' pet projects – have taken a dim view of such exchanges in the case of the stimulus law.

The Washington Post

Funding Passed for Widening Of I-66

1.5-Mile Segment To Proceed in Board Reversal

By Eric M. Weiss
Washington Post Staff Writer
Thursday, March 19, 2009; B01

A regional transportation panel reversed itself yesterday, approving funding to widen the first 1.5-mile stretch of westbound Interstate 66 inside the Capital Beltway.

The action, which came as two Fairfax County supervisors switched their votes, clears the way to use a federal earmark for the first of three widening projects on I-66. But the rest of the project remains unfunded and probably is years from bringing relief to motorists.

The move reversed a decision by the National Capital Region Transportation Planning Board last month to strip the $75 million project from the region's transportation plan. Yesterday, the swing votes were cast by two Fairfax County supervisors, Catherine M. Hudgins (D-Hunter Mill) and Linda Q. Smyth (D-Providence), who last month had voted against the project.

In exchange, the Virginia Department of Transportation assured the board that no further funding for the I-66 project beyond the first phase would be committed until several studies are completed. But, as some board members pointed out, that is not much of a concession, because the state does not have money to fund the other two phases of the project anyway.

The I-66 project would connect a series of acceleration and deceleration lanes, effectively widening the westbound highway from two lanes to three between Fairfax Drive and Sycamore Street and from three lanes to four between Washington Boulevard and the Dulles Access Road. The first phase of the widening, from Fairfax Drive to Sycamore Street, was scheduled to start next year. It was funded by a congressional earmark sponsored by U.S. Rep. Frank R. Wolf (R) and former congressman Tom Davis (R).

The studies would look at requiring vehicles to carry at least three people to use the roadway's carpool lanes instead of the current two; introducing tolls and congestion pricing; increasing transit in the corridor; and additional roadway improvements both inside and outside the Beltway. Some parts of the study could take as long as a decade, VDOT officials said.

But Virginia Transportation Secretary Pierce R. Homer, in a letter to the board, said the first part of the study on transit alternatives would be presented to the board by the end of the year.

Hudgins and Smyth said the agreement, which passed on a voice vote, would ensure that VDOT keeps its word in studying alternatives to building more road capacity. They noted that the state promised to look at alternatives when the widening project was first approved two years ago.

"This just brings us back to where we were in 2007," Hudgins said.

David Snyder, a Falls Church City Council member who serves on the board, said the compromise was a "victory for good government" and would force VDOT to follow through with its promise for more study.

Fairfax County leaders said that the county is strongly in favor of the project and that its representatives to the regional panel had been told to change their votes.

But Fairfax County Supervisor Pat S. Herrity (R-Springfield) complained that the vote does not do what the county board had agreed to: commit funding for the entire project.

"We want all three [phases] back in without conditions," Herrity said. "This project has been studied to death."

Transportation board member Jonathan L. Way (R), a Manassas City Council member, offered an amendment that would have returned all three phases to the plan. It was defeated.

Pro-transit groups and Arlington County residents, who have long opposed the widening, said reviving it was a bad move.

"For years we have been saying, 'Wiser, not wider,' " said Peter Harnik of the Maywood Community Association in Arlington. "The board's vote last month showed you agree with this approach and we think it still holds today. If you reverse yourselves today, you'll be voting for ready, fire, aim."