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Road revenue needed, official says

Oregon Highway plan recommends gas tax increase

PENDLETON (AP) — Gasoline tax increases in recent years have improved Oregon highways greatly, but more will be needed to keep them in top shape, the state's leading transportation official says.

Don Forbes, newly appointed director of the state Department of Transportation, said Oregon will continue to rely heavily on fuel taxes if improvements are to be made over the next 20 years.

In 1985, the Legislature approved the first of a series of increases that has doubled the state gas tax to 20 cents per gallon. Since the tax hikes, the number of highway surfaces rated "fair or better" has risen from 48 percent in 1984 to 69 percent in 1990, Forbes said Monday.

"That clearly couldn't have been possible without the gas tax," he said.

The state's 1991 Oregon Highway Plan recommends that gas tax increases of 2 cents per year be adopted over the next 20 years. Increases in weight distance fees and registration fees also have been recommended.

Without the tax increases, the emphasis will be on preserving the state roadways. The department could hit its preservation goal of 90 percent "fair or better" roadways by 2010, but traffic congestion problems would increase, Forbes said.

About \$10.7 billion would be spent in the next two decades without the tax increase.

A 2-cent annual increase and other related tax hikes would raise an extra \$5 billion over 20 years. With the additional money, the state could meet its

preservation goals and would be able to fund the "Access Oregon Highway" program to upgrade 15 strategic roadways in the state, Forbes said.

More roads would be rebuilt and bridges retrofitted under the program and more maintenance would be done if the \$5 billion is raised, Forbes said.

Whether additional taxes will be approved depends on how important the public views good highways, he said.

Half of the 2-cent increase would go toward keeping up with inflation, the other half to additional work, he said.

Forbes became department director July 1, following the retirement of Bob Bothman. Before that Forbes served three years as head of the Highway Division.

Forbes said the Portland area's rapid growth isn't coming at the expense of other areas in highway development funds. The emphasis in Eastern Oregon is to preserve roadways. In Portland, the goal is to develop options such as car pooling and bus transportation to defer new projects.

"We can't build enough highways to keep up," he said.

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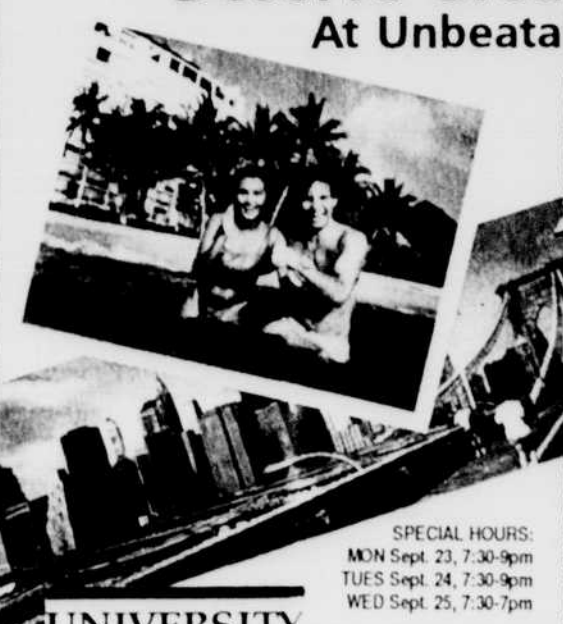
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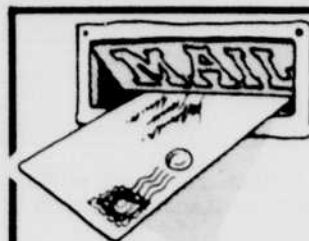
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