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State legislators need to oppose federal gas tax

In 1758, philosopher David Hume wrote: "Nothing appears more surprising ... than the easiness with which the many are governed by the few; and the implicit submission with which men resign their own sentiments and passions to those of their rulers."

GUEST COMMENTARY

Today Hume would surely marvel at how easily each year a few highway barons on Capitol Hill, with help from like-minded special interest groups, collect hundreds of millions of dollars from Oregon motorists and then parcel out highway funds to Salem with all kinds of costly strings attached.

Authority for the federal highway program expires Sept. 30. But the new authorization winding its way through Congress to extend the program six more years has yet to address an issue costing American motorists more than \$20 billion each year: What should happen to the federal gas tax?

Most members of Congress simply assume the federal tax will either stay where it is, at 18.4 cents per gallon, or go up. The American Road and Transportation Builders Association wants a two cent per gallon tax hike in each of the next six years, and Rep. Don Young, R-Alaska, has proposed raising the federal gas tax to 33 cents per gallon over six years — a whopping 79 percent increase.

But there is another option. Last year, Sen. James Inhofe, R-Okla., offered a bill to return all but two cents of the 18.4 cent federal gas tax to the states in the form of a block grant. Under Inhofe's plan, Uncle Sam's take would have been only \$27 million in 2001 instead of the \$252 million Oregon motorists actually paid into the Federal Highway Trust Fund.

Right there, on page S.7929 of the Congressional Record for Aug. 1, 2002,

Inhofe says his bill, "Restores to states and local communities the ability to make their own transportation decisions without the interference of Washington. ... I have long believed that the best decisions are those made at the local level. Unfortunately many of the transportation choices made by cities and states are governed by federal rules and regulations. This bill returns to states the responsibility and resources to make their own transportation decisions."

The two-cent federal tax would still be enough to maintain the Interstate system, build roads on federal lands, address highway safety issues and conduct some research. Road-building, after all, is traditionally a state and local responsibility. The 41,000-mile federal Interstate building era, which officially ended in 1991, was a one-time exception to that tradition.

So why haven't Oregon's two U.S. senators and Oregon Gov. Ted Kulongoski, along with elected officials from other states, rallied around Inhofe's proposal and demanded its passage this year? Why would Oregon's governor and state legislators resign their own self-interests and welcome Washington's intrusion into their affairs?

Some say once the federal government launched the Interstate program, special interest groups captured it and helped make sure it was well-funded. And with the passage of time the states have become reluctant to challenge the entrenched status quo.

As the U.S. Congress gears up to meet the Sept. 30 deadline, this is a fine time for Oregon motorists to contact their Washington, D.C., representatives and ask why the Inhofe proposal isn't yet part of this year's new highway bill.

Dr. Ronald Fraser, who writes on public policy issues for the DKT Liberty Project, a Washington-based civil liberties organization, lives in Burke, Va.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Councilor favors pro-growth faction

As president of LandWatch Lane County — a group whose mission is to protect farms, forests and open space

from sprawl — I'm delighted to learn that Ward 7 City Councilor Scott Meisner is "concerned about community growth" ("Legal eagle," ODE, Aug. 20). He says he doesn't want his community to be like others "that have grown badly

Turn to **LETTERS**, page 9A

the ANNEX

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