

Portland labor group supports temporary 10-cent gas tax

If you live in Portland, vote for the temporary 10 cent gas tax. Just don't expect it to solve the City's serious street maintenance problem.

The four-year 10-cent-a-gallon gas tax is on the May 17 ballot as Measure 26-173. Backed by the Northwest Oregon Labor Council, the measure would raise about \$16 million a year. Of that, about \$9 million a year will pay for street maintenance, and about \$7 million a year will pay for safety improvements like sidewalks, lighting, bike routes, and safety improvements around schools. The trouble is, \$9 million a year is a drop in the bucket: A 2013 audit said it would take more than \$70 million a year for 10 years to deal with the City's street maintenance backlog, thanks to decades of underfunding by the city.

Why isn't the City aiming for a complete fix?

"Because we didn't think we could get a dollar-a-gallon gas tax passed," says Steve Novick, the City Commissioner in charge of the Portland Bureau of Transportation (PBOT). "Getting a

piece of the pie is better than nothing."

Last year, Novick and Mayor Charlie Hales considered pushing a street fee that would be assessed on property owners, but they backed off in face of opposition from the public and other members of City Council.

The 2013 audit blamed City Council for spending money on other priorities — like streetcar operations, downtown marketing, and transit mall upkeep — that should have gone to street maintenance. It wasn't the first time: The City Auditor's office warned in 2006 and again in 2008 that deferring street maintenance would result in higher costs later on.

Novick admits that the maintenance backlog is a product of decades of City Council decisions, but says the current Portland City Council tried to show good faith last year by adding \$20 million to the street maintenance budget from the City's general fund — the first time since 1985 that's happened. And Commissioner Amanda Fritz earlier this year got a policy passed that says at least half of unspent budget funds and other one-time revenue must be spent on maintaining infrastructure.

The proposed gas tax misses two groups of road users, Novick acknowledges: electric vehicles, because they don't use gas, and heavy trucks. Heavy trucks are responsible for 13 percent of road use, but they were exempted from the tax for practical reasons, because they mostly refuel outside of Portland. Novick says he plans to add a surcharge to the weight-

mile tax assessed on trucks.

Gas is cheap right now, but roads continue to be expensive, and are only going to get more so. Cars are more fuel efficient than they used to be, and that's a good thing, except that it means less dedicated revenue to maintain roads.

As many as 20 other Oregon cities have a local gas tax,

though the highest one elsewhere is 5 cents a gallon. The State of Oregon also has a gas tax of 30 cents per gallon that it shares with cities and counties to pay for roads, and Multnomah County has a 3-cent-a-gallon gas tax. [The federal gas tax — which has been 18.4 cents per gallon since 1993 — pays for federal highways.]

In 2015, the Oregon Legislature was expecting to pass increased road funding via a statewide gas tax increase, but the effort failed when Republican legislators blocked the package to protest passage of a clean fuels mandate. Oregon State Building Trades Council Execu-

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