

Road Taxes

Trucks pound pavement but won't pay for potholes

With a Eugene gas tax for potholes heading to possible defeat at the polls, the City Council may turn to a road tax to make up the difference. But will the fee be fair?

A heavy truck causes 5,000 to 10,000 times more road damage than a car, studies show. But a street "utility fee" under consideration by the council lets trucks completely off the hook.

The proposed fee would be based on the estimated number of parking spaces at a business, government building or residence but would not include a truck-use factor.

Not charging trucks could generate a voter backlash to city road fees. That's what happened in 2000 when trucking lobbyists got the Oregon Legislature to repeal state truck weight-mile charges, but voters slammed the tax break in a referendum by a 7-1 margin.

A Eugene City Council majority argued that a truck fee would be too complicated to calculate and administer.

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"It might have been impossible" to charge trucks, said Councilor Alan Zelenka at a May 23 meeting.

"It just administratively can't be done," said Councilor Chris Pryor.

But city attorney Jerry Lidz said at an April 10 council transportation funding subcommittee meeting that "it would be possible" to write a road fee that charged businesses based on their truck usage, according to meeting minutes.

To calculate the fee, the city could use a truck trip generation factor. In the past the city has used passenger vehicle trip generation numbers to calculate systems development charges and once proposed a road maintenance fee based on the numbers. There's less data available on truck trip generation, but it's not non-existent, according to a 2001 study by the federal National Research Council.

The NRC study includes almost 40 pages of tables illustrating various methods used by a wide range of cities to calculate truck trip generation for different business types. The truck impact is calculated based on number of square feet in the business, employees or other factors. For example, an Australian study found that regional retailing centers generate two truck trips per day per 1,000 square feet.

Such truck trip generation methods might not be entirely accurate, but they appear to be at least as accurate as the road utility fees the city plans to charge homeowners. Homeowners pay for water and electricity utilities based on how much a meter says they actually use. But the city proposes to charge a flat road "utility" fee, regardless of actual road use.

Details have yet to be worked out, but apparently the fee won't be lower for those who bike, walk, bus or carpool to work, school and/or stores. Although a city study documents that people living on the sprawling edges of Eugene generate far more car trips, the road fee won't be lower for those with shorter commutes.

Some adjustments may be made. Councilor Bonny Bettman said she'd like to see houses with multiple-car garages pay more.

The exact fee hasn't been calculated, but figures between \$100 to \$200 per house per year have been talked about, making the fee one of the largest tax increases in recent years.

The "utility fee" will be the most regressive tax the city charges. Shut-in retirees scraping by on Social Security will pay the same as people with million dollar paychecks and fleets of cars.

Mayor Kitty Piercy questioned whether the "utility fee" could be adjusted for lower income people at a May 23 council meeting.

"I don't believe the [road tax] committee made an attempt" to look at the impact on the poor, replied Public Works Director Kurt Corey.

A local income tax with steeply graduated rates and a generous low-income exemption would be far more progressive. Without a truck factor, distance adjustment or adjustment for actual car use, the city's proposed "road utility fee" may be just as inaccurate as income level in judging actual road impact.

An income tax imposed on everyone employed in Eugene would also have the advantage of making commuters pay their fair share. The city has estimated about 40 percent of those who work in Eugene live outside the city. Almost two-thirds of workers in Springfield work outside of Springfield, according to Census data.

Another approach would be to divert money from building new roads to feed urban sprawl to instead fill potholes in existing roads. For example, the city plans to extend Chad Drive to connect it to the Gateway area using money that could be used for pothole repair. The now dead-end road on the edge of town serves *The Register-Guard*, the paper's business park and other urban sprawl.

Another way around a big pothole tax may be just to redefine the problem. The city claims it has a \$170 million road maintenance backlog. But "I don't necessarily buy into those numbers," Councilor Bettman said. Bettman said she noticed on a recent trip to the Northeast that many cities have chosen to live with far more potholes than Eugene. "The level of [repair] service that most communities expect on their roads is far less than what we have now," she said. **EW**

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