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Mileage tax has promise

Gas tax is outmoded

With petroleum prices lower for the time being and more drivers buying hybrid and electric cars, Oregon is about to experiment with taxing vehicles based on the miles they are driven instead of on the fuel they consume.

This is an interesting and valid exercise, but one that raises a variety of issues that must be addressed.

The basic scheme is to replace fuel taxes paid at the pump with a flat 1.5 cent per mile charge for use of public roads in Oregon. Up to 5,000 volunteers will start testing the concept on July 1, using small digital devices to track their mileage. California, Washington and Indiana all are at earlier stages of considering the concept.

U.S. drivers, especially those who don't live in the Northeast where there are more toll highways, are pretty spoiled when it comes to transportation costs. Generally, our gasoline is taxed at far lower rates than is the case in the rest of the developed world. And we face far fewer toll roads. Drive through France, Mexico and scores of other places, and you will be reaching for your wallet every hour or so.

It's safe to say nobody relishes having to pay either taxes or tolls, but expensive public infrastructure like highways and bridges is one of the best examples of government providing something private citizens need but are unable to accomplish on our own. Considering the systemic changes underway in oil markets and automobiles, fuel taxes simply can't keep up. Only in recent years has technology come along that will allow accurate monitoring of actual miles driven, giving a new option for transportation funding.

Civil liberties activists see the monitoring devices as a potential intrusion on privacy, in effect giv-

ing government a real-time picture of where all vehicles are moving at any given time. Oregon has responded by designing one option that uses global positioning satellite tracking and another option that relies on a simple odometer that counts passing miles. Any records that are collected are supposed to be carefully controlled and then destroyed after they have served their revenue purpose.

In any event, such privacy worries may be pointless in a nation where smart phones can already be tracked anywhere and cameras watch over many streets and highways.

Another concern is expressed by owners and dealers of hybrid and electric cars, who fear they will lose the tax advantage they gained from avoiding having to buy gasoline or diesel. But the fact is that they use the roads, too, and should be helping pay to maintain them.

As this trial of charging for highway use moves forward, it will bear watching to make certain that rural drivers — who are bound to have to travel greater distances to jobs, schools, healthcare and other necessities — are no more burdened than they already are by fuel taxes. Anything that might worsen the state's urban-rural divide must be avoided.

Oregonians are suspicious about any changes in the tax system. We do a better job than many states of keeping it fair. People will be justifiably wary of this mileage tax. But if it works, it might be a equitable way to match our highway use with what we pay.

No money for trains

Does the GOP want to governor or allow infrastructure atrophy?

The horrific Amtrak train crash near Philadelphia last week exposed a technology gap, spurring considerable discussion. But will it cause the political leadership of this governing generation to take action?

House Speaker John Boehner's response to a reporter's inquiry about the accident tells us something. Asked whether the circumstances were evidence of the need for investment in rail, Boehner said that was a "stupid question."

The inadequacy of our rail network is an example of how America resembles a Third World country. In some parts of America the condition of highways and bridges evokes the same comparison.

The *New York Times* on Wednesday described the differential between U.S. investment in rail and rail investment in European and Asian countries. The *Times* noted that even emerging economies such as India are investing more in rail transit than the U.S.

While the rail network will not

likely be near the top of the 2016 presidential discussion, the topic goes to the heart of the essential question — do Republicans want to govern America or allow the nation's infrastructure to atrophy?

It is not far-fetched to say that the only reliable appropriation the governing congressional party will make is in weapons systems and military funding.

"The Plot Against Trains" by Adam Gopnik in *The New Yorker* discusses what he calls American declinism. "What we have, uniquely in America, is a political class, and an entire political party, devoted to the idea that any money spent on public goods is money misplaced, not because the state goods might not be good but because they would distract us from the larger principle that no ultimate good can be found in the state."

Sooner or later in this century — unless we are resigned to a permanent state of decline — our leaders will have to reckon with a decaying transportation network, which includes trains.

GUEST COLUMN

Not everything is an emergency

By STATE SEN. BETSY JOHNSON

The Oregon Legislature is beginning to resemble a 9-1-1 call center. Almost everything is an emergency.

Increasingly these are the words you find in the House and Senate bills coming out of the Legislature: "An emergency is declared to exist, and this act takes effect on its passage."

Any law with an emergency clause is protected from the people's veto power. Voters cannot challenge it through the referendum process.

You might be surprised what constitutes an emergency. In this session so far, it includes bills like "banning the box," which makes it unlawful for employers to ask job applicants to check a box if they've been convicted of a felony. Why would ex-felons' job hunts constitute an emergency? There are many non-felons who endure extended job searches.

Or how about the "motor voter" law, HB 2177, which automatically registers licensed drivers to vote. What kind of an emergency exists that requires drivers to be automatically registered to vote?

Then there's the recently approved gun law, SB 941, which requires licensed gun dealers to conduct background checks for private sales of legal firearms. (If you buy or sell on the black market, you're exempt from this emergency.)

Soon to come is SB 822, an emergency bill requested by criminal defense attorneys, who want grand jury proceedings tape-recorded. Criminal defense attorneys, apparently, can't wait to find out the identities of victims and witnesses.

At the rate we're going, all bills

will be deemed emergency acts. It will become routine. Perhaps that's the point. If citizens complain that a controversial bill has been labeled an emergency to protect it from the people's veto power, legislators can quell any suspicion by simply saying, "Most bills have an emergency clause."

Voters still have some constitutional protection. Tax bills, for example, cannot be enacted as an emergency.

If you're a citizen curious about the number of bills that were passed as emergencies in the last regular session, the information may not be readily available. If you call the legislative assembly office, they may direct you to the state legislature's website and a section called "Citizen Engagement."

There you'll find a 190-page document called the "2013 Summary of Legislation." One caller I know prowled through that, read the brief descriptions and effective dates of each bill that passed, and found that about half of the roughly 300 bills listed there were emergencies.

One bill that slipped through without an emergency clause was SB 833, and its fate is a lesson in why referendum power is important.

SB 833 allowed illegal immigrants to obtain driver cards. Since it wasn't an emergency, opponents had 90 days after the end of the legislative session to exercise the power of referendum. They collected enough signatures from qualified voters and forced SB 833 onto the November 2014 ballot. As Ballot Measure 88, voters rejected driver cards for illegal immigrants by almost a 2-to-1 margin.

The people's veto power exists



State Sen. Betsy Johnson

for a reason. It serves as a check on legislators who can become so focused on what happens inside the state Capitol building that they forget there's an entire state outside the door.

We work in a grand, majestic building. It's open to the public. But once the legislature is in session, a legislator's time is often consumed talking

to other legislators and lobbyists. We don't always notice things like emergency clauses and whether they are really needed. Some of my bills have carried emergency clauses.

Our state's frequent use of the emergency clause is not unique.

Former Washington Gov. Chris Gregoire, concerned about similar abuse in her state, began vetoing emergency clauses on bills, leaving intact the rest of the legislation. One of her first such vetoes was an emergency clause on a bill adding porphyria to the list of disabilities for special parking privileges.

The Olympian newspaper praised her in an editorial: "The Legislature's overuse of the emergency clause should incense the public because it takes away their right to reject laws adopted by the Legislature. Where's the outrage?"

Oregon's constitution also allows the governor to veto an emergency provision in new bills without affecting the rest of the bill.

Gov. Kate Brown should use this power. As Secretary of State, she pushed for the "motor voter" bill, ostensibly to make it easier for more voters to exercise their right to vote.

The emergency clause does exactly the opposite.

It takes away the people's right to vote.

Betsy Johnson, D-Scappoose, represents District 16, covering Clatsop and Columbia counties and parts of Multnomah, Tillamook and Washington.

The people's veto power exists for a reason.

Hillary, Jeb, Facebook and disorder

By THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN
New York Times News Service

For a presidential campaign that has started so early, it's striking how little most of the candidates want to engage with major issues of the day, let alone the future.

Hillary Clinton won't take a clear stand on two big issues she helped to negotiate as secretary of state: the free-trade deal with Pacific nations and the nuclear deal with Iran.

Jeb Bush's campaign seems stuck on whether he is or is not his brother's keeper. Marco Rubio was for comprehensive immigration reform before he was against it. While Sens. Rand Paul and Bernie Sanders are motivated by clear ideologies, the others, so far, evince much more compelling ambitions to be president than compelling reasons for why they should be.

That can't last. Just follow the headlines. We're in the middle of some huge disruptive inflections in technology, the labor market and geopolitics that will raise fundamental questions about the future of work and the social contracts between governments and their people and employers and employees. These will all erupt in the next presidency.

What are the signs of that? Well, my candidate for best lead paragraph on a news article so far this year goes to Tom Goodwin, an executive at Havas Media, whose essay March 3 on Techcrunch.com began: "Uber, the world's largest taxi company, owns no vehicles. Facebook, the world's most popular media owner, creates no content. Alibaba, the most valuable retailer, has no inventory. And Airbnb, the world's largest accommodation provider, owns no real estate. Something interesting is happening."

There sure is. We're at the start of a

major shift on the question of what's worth owning. What all of the above companies have in common is that they have either created trust platforms that match supply and demand for things people never thought of supplying: a spare bedroom in their home or a seat in their car or a commercial link between a small retailer in North Dakota and a small manufacturer in China. Or they are behavioral platforms that spin off extremely valuable data for retailers and advertisers or they are behavioral platforms on which ordinary people can generate reputations — for driving, hosting or any skill you can imagine — and then market themselves globally.

This is a result of the exponential growth in computing power, storage, networking, sensors and software generation and interoperability, which is allowing us to both gather massive amounts of data and apply software to that data to see patterns at a speed and scope unknown before. And it is taking friction out of so many things at once: from hailing a cab to reserving a room in someone's home in Timbuktu to buying groceries to learning from anyone anywhere to designing an airplane part on a 3-D printer in a week instead of six months. Complexity is becoming free.

A recent study by the Oxford Martin School concluded that 47 percent of U.S. jobs are at high risk of being taken by smart machines and software in the next two decades. And what is interesting, notes James Manyika, a director of the McKinsey Global Institute and co-author of "No Ordinary Disruption," is that, contrary to expectations, "knowledge workers at the middle and the top" may be more threatened than those doing physical work. For example, The Associated



Thomas L. Friedman

Press now uses computers, not reporters, to generate more than 3,000 financial reports per quarter. This can free up workers to do more creative work, but they have to be trained for it.

On geopolitics, we still have great power rivalries, but the most relevant divide in the world will no longer be East-West, capitalist-communist. It will be the World of Order versus the

World of Disorder, as environmental, sectarian and economic pressures are pulverizing weak and failed states.

Every day now you read about people fleeing the World of Disorder for the World of Order. Rohingya, a mostly Muslim group, from Myanmar and Bangladesh are trying to get into Thailand and Malaysia; Africans and Arabs are trying to cross the Mediterranean to Europe; Central American parents have sent thousands of their kids to the United States. Israel's government has started sending letters to 45,000 Eritrean and Sudanese refugees — who walked, rode and sailed to Israel in search of order and work — telling them they have 30 days to accept \$3,500 in cash and a one-way ticket home or to an unnamed third country in Africa or face prison, The Washington Post reported last week.

Last year, the U.N.'s refugee agency said there are more displaced people worldwide — some 50 million — than at any time since World War II.

But here's the rub: We don't know what to do. We used to rely on empires, colonizers and dictators to control a lot of these places, but we're now in a post-imperial, post-colonial and, in many places, post-autocratic age. No one wants to touch these disorderly zones because all you win is a bill. And most are incapable of democratic self-governance. Who will control these areas? What if the answer is nobody? It will be one of the big leadership challenges of the next decade.

So, to paraphrase Trotsky once more: Our presidential candidates may not be interested in talking seriously about the future yet, but the future will be interested in talking to them.

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