

Updating Oregon's gas tax makes sense

As summer driving season rolls in, it's a good time to think about how we pay for our roads.

EDITORIAL

The voice of the Chieftain

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 giving 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 buying less 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 an equitable way to match our highway use with what we pay.

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SNAP Incentive boosts health

GUEST COLUMN

Lauren Johnson

Wallowa County Farmers Market and Lower Valley Farmers Market are partnering up to launch a SNAP Incentive program for this farmers market season.

Here's how it works: the markets match the money that SNAP (food stamp) users spend at the market, dollar for dollar, up to \$10. The \$10 can be used on fresh fruits and vegetables at the market throughout the season. By doubling the amount they can buy at the market, the program makes local, fresh food more accessible for people who have low incomes. It helps them stretch their limited food budget while empowering them to make healthy choices for themselves and their families.

SNAP Incentive programs have been tested across the country and shown to increase the amounts of fruits and vegetables that participants eat. Wallowa County Farmers Market and Lower Valley Farmers Market are bringing the program to farmers markets in Wallowa, Enterprise, and Joseph this summer. The program began at the first Farmers Market in Joseph on May 23, and will start in Enterprise on Thursday, June 4. The program will begin at the same time for the Lower Valley Farmers Market, located in Wallowa (open on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday in Spring/Summer and on Saturdays year-round).

In February, I wrote a column about food insecurity: the state of being without reliable access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food. About 1,000 people in this county suffer from food insecurity, and as I explained in my last

column, that can mean increased risk of diet-related diseases, developmental problems in children, and an increased risk of psychological problems in children like aggression, anxiety, depression, and hyperactivity, as well as depression in adults. SNAP incentive programs allow food-insecure families to choose the most nutritious food by expanding their limited food budget. Double Up Food Bucks, a similar program offered at more than 150 markets across five states, found that "93% of participating SNAP users at farmers markets report eating more fruits and vegetables, including more varieties, and 83% report buying fewer high-fat, low-nutrition snacks with their benefits." Portland Farmers Market found that 88% of returning SNAP users at the market reported eating more fruits and vegetables because of the incentive program.

Fruits and vegetables from the farmers market are much more nutritionally dense than their counterparts in grocery stores because they're so much fresher; produce begins to lose its nutritional value as soon as it's picked. Studies have shown that produce shipped long distances, handled roughly, and stored has lost part of its nutrition. Farmers market produce is extremely fresh, and hence extremely nutrient-dense. If a family can only buy limited

amounts of fresh fruits and vegetables, it's important to make extremely fresh, local produce accessible to them because it delivers the most nutrient bang for your buck.

Incentive programs also support local farmers. SNAP already brings in federal dollars to the county: in 2011, SNAP users in Wallowa County spent \$1,533,562 at grocery stores and farmers markets. If 100% of people in Wallowa County who qualified for SNAP signed up for it, an additional \$921,320 would be brought into the county. Incentivizing SNAP users to spend part of those funds at farmers markets would allow local producers to benefit from those federal dollars (and from the match funds).

Slow Food Wallowas 2012 Pignic raised the initial funds for the project. Soroptimist of Wallowa County and Wallowa Memorial Hospital will contribute. The farmers markets plan to fund the program by holding lemonade stands at large community events throughout the summer. Every cup of fresh-squeezed lemonade sold will provide \$3 to matching funds so that SNAP participants can double their purchases of fresh food at this summer's markets. So buy a cup of lemonade this summer when you see a stand — you know you want to.

Lauren Johnson is Community Food Systems Coordinator in Wallowa County, an Americorps RARE (Resource Assistance for Rural Environments) volunteer position.

LTC Ombudsman serves 400 locally

GUEST COLUMN

Gretchen Jordan

The Office of the Long-Term Care Ombudsman was established in Oregon in 1981 and is tasked with enhancing quality of life, improving quality of care, and protecting the individual resident's rights. The Older Americans Act created the Ombudsman program and there is one in every state. In Oregon, it is an independent state advocacy agency that responds to complaints and concerns of residents, family, or facility staff by responding to calls and maintaining a presence in a facility by making regular visits. This is a free and confidential service for all Oregon residents, including about 400 residents in Union and Wallowa counties.

If those 400 people who currently live in Umatilla and Wallowa county's 18 licensed long-term care facilities — places that provide care to seniors who cannot live independently because of their age or physical or mental condition — formed their own city, it would nearly be the size of North Powder.

Representing these people's interests is the job of Todd Steele, Deputy State Long-Term Care Ombudsman who works with certified local volunteers to help protect the rights and dignity of residents. "We serve as their independent, confidential advocates," Steele said, "It's Oregonians out in Oregon helping Oregonians."

Residents of long-term care facilities often need someone to act on their behalf because many have a physical ailment or mental issue, such as Alzheimer's disease or another form of dementia that makes

them vulnerable and dependent on someone else for care. Ombudsmen also have to deal with situations that could complicate anyone's life — such as depression, loneliness, family struggles and complicated health care situations, and the related coverage with Medicare, Medicaid or private health insurance.

If an Ombudsman so much as suspects neglect or abuse in a complaint, Steele said, they immediately report it to the state's Adult Protective Services Division, which has investigators specifically trained to handle abuse cases.

But, he said, the volunteer Ombudsmen do handle just about everything else, including complaints about the food served at nursing homes, maintenance issues, billing questions, and concerns any resident may have about their home or care.

"Our volunteers are the greatest," Steele said. "They observe and visit with the residents and when appropriate, help facilitate a resolution."

Ombudsman volunteers who work with Todd Steele have a variety of backgrounds that bring skills to be effective advocates. They seek to ensure that care center residents have their rights respected and receive good care.

The rewards of being a certified Ombudsman appeal to many who have recent-

ly retired and are looking for a meaningful volunteer opportunity. They can arrange visiting schedules to the facilities to their needs and to see a full picture of a facility's operations. Steele estimates about 65 percent of the residents visited have no need for intervention. Another 25 percent have problems they can address and resolve. Of the remaining 10 percent, perhaps half result in a report to a protective service agency and the other half will require deeper investigation and possible legal action. Many times, though, the presence of an Ombudsman helps improve the quality of care for all and prevents further issues needing any intervention. "It's all about being a voice for many who cannot speak for themselves. To see someone's life improve — that's the biggest thing," Steele said.

More volunteers in all areas of Union and Wallowa County are needed; over half of the long-term care facilities do not have a volunteer assigned to them. Certified Ombudsman volunteers are over age 21, can pass a background check and enjoy a flexible schedule. Training for new volunteers is scheduled in The Dalles for mid-August.

Gretchen Jordan is Coordinator of Volunteers with the Office of the Long-Term Care Ombudsman. For more information about volunteering, contact her at gretchen.jordan@ltco.state.or.us or 503-378-6340 or visit www.oregon.gov/LTCO. To report a concern about a long-term care facility, call 1-800-522-2602 or visit www.oregon.gov/LTCO for helpful information.

Important to air sheriff's views

To the Editor:

The Chieftain deserves major plaudits for last week's front page story entitled 'Under the Gun, New law spawns confusion, resistance.'

That the Wallowa County Sheriff is thumbing his nose at a new state law is a topic that needs to be reported.

To me, whether one is a "band-wagoner" who's applauding the sheriff's action or aghast that he's challenging a higher authority on his interpretation of federal principles is irrelevant.

The story itself is critical and the Chieftain did an excellent job sharing the Sheriff's reasons and beliefs, especially by emphasizing that the controversial law in

question was enacted without voter approval.

Maybe police can, or even have the duty to challenge state law, I'm not sure, but I firmly believe such powers can go astray unless police departments are held accountable for their actions.

And that cannot happen unless the general populace adopts a monitoring role.

At this point in time, it appears that Wallowa County is not doing its part. We're so busy raising cattle, irrigating crops, and

catering to tourists in the name of survival that few are stepping forth to do the little things that promote accountability.

Sure, Wallowa County has a great track record in voter participation, but didn't we just conclude a countywide election where only one position had more than one name on the ballot and a handful had no names at all?

I hope the Wallowa County Sheriff doesn't want to go it alone and actually desires accountability. It's our responsibility as U.S. citizens to provide it.

To all of the above, I plead guilty. Yet I'll try to stay informed.

Rocky Wilson
Wallowa

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USPS No. 665-100

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Wallowa County's Newspaper Since 1884
Enterprise, Oregon

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PUBLISHED EVERY WEDNESDAY BY:
EO Media Group

Periodical Postage Paid at Enterprise and additional mailing offices

Subscription rates (includes online access)	1 Year
Wallowa County	\$40.00
Out-of-County	\$57.00

Subscriptions must be paid prior to delivery

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POSTMASTER — Send address changes to
Wallowa County Chieftain
P.O. Box 338
Enterprise, OR 97828

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