

Raise the gas tax

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Imagine a tax increase that makes sense to Republicans and Democrats, liberals and conservatives, the Chamber of Commerce and unions, truckers and environmentalists. Imagine a tax increase that some politicians would call a “no-brainer.”

That would be an increase in the tax on gasoline. And since gas is cheaper than it's been in years, now is an opportune moment to enact it.

For years environmentalists have called for a tax on carbon-emitting fuels as a way of steering consumer and corporate behavior. The aim is to reduce the burning of coal and gasoline, which releases carbon dioxide into the atmosphere and contributes to the heating of the planet. Raising the price of gas would discourage consumption, reduce pollution, encourage the use of alternative transportation, and spur the purchase of fuel-efficient vehicles.

At the same time, corporations and business groups have wanted to increase the gas tax in order to pay for repairing the nation's highways, bridges, transit systems, airports, and seaports. Infrastructure has been neglected for decades. Some 70,000 bridges—one in nine—are deemed structurally deficient. The Interstate Highway System, created in the 1960s, needs major repairs. Last year, then transportation secretary Ray LaHood declared, "Our infrastructure is on life support."

Federal spending on infrastructure has fallen to its lowest levels in 60 years. The Highway Trust Fund is expected to run out of money in May if Congress does not transfer more into it or raise fuel taxes. Congress has not raised the gas tax since 1993, when it was set at 18.4 percent. A modest tax hike would replenish the Highway Fund and, at current prices, still leave drivers economically ahead.

Spending to repair highways, bridges, and rail lines is not only an investment in the nation's economic future. It supports the creation of good jobs now. That's why unions support a tax hike for spending on infrastructure.

Raising the gas tax would be a burden for low-income families, however. Any increase should come with a provision that mitigates this impact, whether through greater federal benefits or targeted tax breaks.

Since June gas prices have dropped 40 percent to an average of a little over \$2 a gallon—a six-year low. Congress could view this drop as simply a windfall for consumers. Or it could be seen as the occasion for a long-overdue investment in the economy and the environment. It's a no-brainer.