

Transcript of Remarks Made During House Finance Subcommittee Regarding HB 878
By Rep. Mike Harrison
April 8, 2015 | 10:30 a.m.

Members I think all of you, back six, seven weeks ago on this bill, we had obviously the comptroller come by and present some options that we could take a look at, but at this time, I am still committed to raising awareness about the condition of our roads and bridges and the many Tennessee communities waiting on projects out there.

Just like the Governor, I believe that funding our transportation system is best addressed through comprehensive reform. Today I am pledging to join the governor as a key proponent of transportation funding reform that will make long-term, identified needs.

I want to commend TDOT Commissioner John Schroer, who has been warning us all not only the last year but the last few years on what the crisis that is approaching us.

At issue is a current backlog of hundreds of unfunded state roads and bridge projects throughout Tennessee, against state user fees that haven't been raised since 1989. The list of unfunded transportation projects is only getting longer and is going to grow.

I also want to commend the Transportation Coalition of Tennessee for their efforts over the last few months to raise awareness about this issue. When you have city and county mayors, truckers, transit advocates, engineers, chambers of commerce, and the AARP agreeing on the size and scope of a problem, we should pay attention.

First and foremost, we know that demand is not keeping up with our ability to fund projects. Important projects have been pushed to the back burner. Commissioner Schroer has warned that Tennessee may very soon be in a maintenance-only mode for our bridges and roads.

We also know that our current fixed per gallon user fee doesn't keep up with inflation, nor does it address the issue of vehicles' getting better gas mileage.

Tennessee's gas user fees have not been changed since 1989. Meanwhile, our population has increased 14 percent since 2000 alone, which means we have more traffic on our roads.

Alternative-fuel vehicles run up and down our highways every day, but they do not currently pay their fair share toward the upkeep of roads and bridges.

Earlier this year, the state Office of the Comptroller released an excellent report detailing the different approaches we can take if we want to pursue transportation funding reform.

Those include increasing diesel and gasoline user fees, increasing and equalizing user fees on alternative fuels, indexing fuel user fees to inflation, vehicle registration renewal fee increases on cars and trucks, enacting a highway user fee for electric vehicles, and the creation of high-occupancy toll lanes.

All these things should be on the table. And I am sure there may be more ideas out there worthy of consideration.

Tennessee's roads and bridges are paid for by the people who use them, including tourists, visitors and workers from out of state, and we have a long history of pay-as-you-go. I believe that needs to continue to be the foundation of any reform.

No one wants to pay more; but at the same time, there is no such thing as a free ride. Today, the average Tennessean pays about \$160 a year in state fuel user fees to help pay for transportation infrastructure. The fact is, it costs money to maintain the roads and bridges we have. It costs money to build new roads and bridges.

Any economic development professional will tell you that business and industry look to the availability and condition of transportation infrastructure when they make decisions about new plants and jobs.

We also know that good roads mean safer roads for our children, family and friends to travel on.

We know the size of the problem, and what I hope to find out is how willing and how far Tennesseans will go toward fixing the problem.

Some say we should let the federal government address the issue. The problem there is the federal government trust fund has been broken for years, and there is not a solution in sight.

Plus, this is a Tennessee problem, and we need to solve it here. Here, where we can control what happens to the money. Here, where the strings that so often come attached from Washington.

Other states are taking the same approach. States like Georgia and Virginia understand that quality transportation infrastructure is going to be key to taking full advantage of the economic recovery. Georgia recently passed legislation to raise new funds for transportation. Virginia approved its package in 2013.

I am looking forward to having this conversation with the governor, my colleagues and all Tennesseans. And I am looking forward to working with the General Assembly next year to find a solution to our transportation infrastructure problems.

And with that I move this bill to 2016, and surely we'll come together and fix this problem that all of us know exists out there.

Video of Rep. Harrison's remarks in committee available here:

<http://www.tcoftn.org/press-room.html>