

Opinion

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OUR VIEW

GAS TAXES — AND RECREATION

Spend taxes on trails, too

It may have ended the 2009 legislative session — but the last-minute transportation funding “deal” didn’t deal with much of anything.

All it did was shift some money around and create new problems. Just ask Idaho recreationists, who are starting to fight for \$4.7 million a year to maintain trails and boat docks and groom snowmobile routes.

They have a valid point. Fairness and foresight dictate putting this money into the great outdoors.

Recreationists rightfully feel like they’ve been had. They say lawmakers have violated a long-standing agreement to put 3 percent of gas tax dollars — their share of fuel purchases — into recreation projects.

The \$4.7 million won’t do much to fix roads. According to estimates, Idaho has a \$240 million-a-year shortfall in state and local road and bridge maintenance. But \$4.7 million accounts for about half of the money spent on trails, snowmobile trail grooming and boating facilities.

When Sandra Mitchell of the Idaho Recreation Council predicts Idaho recreation would be gutted, it’s easy to see her point. For the record, Mitchell is no fan of big government; she started her career as an aide to former Sen. Steve Symms, a hero among Idaho con-

servatives.

Well-maintained trails and boat docks aren’t merely a convenience for Idaho weekend warriors. They are a marketable commodity for rural communities making the transition from timber or mining jobs. Idaho’s road-repair campaign is driven first by safety issues, but also by economics — and providing more reliable and convenient roads for commuters and shippers. It doesn’t accomplish much to make this economic investment at the expense of the recreation sector.

Then again, what does make sense about this year’s end-of-session transportation deal? Desperate to give Gov. Butch Otter some \$55 million for roads — but equally desperate to avoid a gas tax increase — lawmakers played a shell game. They decided to get \$21.1 million by cutting off the Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation and the Idaho State Police from the gas tax.

That’s no solution, of course. Starting next week, an eight-member legislative task force will try to find ways to replace the \$21.1 million. Let’s hope for an end to the creative accounting, and some actual problem-solving.

“Our View” is the editorial position of the Idaho Statesman. It is an unsigned opinion expressing the consensus of the Statesman’s editorial board.

READER'S VIEW

Hasty move hurts recreation, economy

BY ADENA COOK

In their haste to get out of town, our state legislators agreed to eliminate a beneficial gas tax-funded program and dump the money into highways to satisfy the governor. They killed the recreation gas tax program, ac-



knowledged to be the best in the country. It was abolished with little debate, for the sake of expediency. Here's what the legislators failed to consider:

Idaho has an established policy not to apply highway taxes on gas not used on highways. For example, farmers and loggers routinely apply for a refund on the taxes they've paid at the pump for gas they've used on the farm or in the woods. Individually, they each get their money back.

In 1983, Idaho motorized recreationists asked the Legislature for the right to give up their individual tax refunds and pool it in a recreation fund. It was set up to be managed and administered by Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation.

This small (3 percent) portion of the gas tax is refunded back to recreation. It benefits Idahoans in many ways, for example: boating facilities, education and enforcement, state parks, bridges and recreation parking lots and facilities, trails, OHV education, search and rescue, and snowmobile trail groomers.

Each one of these benefits has a success story to tell. For snowmobiling, the gas tax pays for the groomers that groom 8,000 miles

leverage this equipment fund by paying additional registration fees. This pays for groomer operation, fuel and other facilities. They augment these dollars with thousands of volunteer hours. Without the gas tax seed money, it would all collapse.

Off-Road Motor Vehicle grants pay for hundreds of miles of trail improvements, trailheads and facilities, bridges, and camping improvements — both formal and informal. For each dollar of gas tax fund granted, many other dollars are added through matching funds and volunteer labor. Projects abide by strict guidelines and are reviewed by multi-user grant committees and the IDPR board.

These projects would never happen without the initial impetus of the gas tax fund.

The boaters who enjoy the benefits of the waterways programs can tell a similar story.

As the projects are implemented, they bring together land managers, professionals from Parks and Recreation, county governments and recreationists. Collectively, they become the recreation infrastructure that supports tourism in rural economies.

Our state legislators took the pennies for highways, and threw away dollars of benefit for recreation. Perhaps as a concession, they set up a task force of legislators to study how the fund can be replaced. They'll be holding meetings this summer to "come up with alternatives." I've got an alternative for them — give us back our gas tax!