

# Tax gas, not income

**I**t is impossible to drive around New Jersey for more than five minutes without encountering a stretch of road that needs major reconstruction. When I drive into Newark, for example, I often take the Garden State Parkway north to Interstate 78. It's simple. I just go up the ramp and I'm on my way to Paris on the Passaic.

But let's say I want to go west on I-78. Oops. Someone forgot to build that connecting ramp. I have to head east on I-78 and then make a complicated U-turn on local streets, wasting perhaps five minutes.

So let's fix that. And let's fix all the intersections that need right-turn lanes. Let's fix those off-ramps with merge-or-die shoulders. Let's fix everything. But where will we get the cash? We can't charge tolls. The political class in New Jersey has proven beyond all argument that toll roads exist not to keep cars on the road but to keep party hacks in their seats.

The other logical source of funds is the gas tax. Some people say this tax is unfair, however.

A reader stated the case against an increased gas tax on these pages last week:

"This tax is paid equally by every driver, but it is far from a fair and equitable means of funding road construction," wrote Byron Lee Conover of West Orange. "It puts an undue burden on lower-income people. The fixed tax is a much higher percentage of \$30,000 a year than of \$200,000."

Well said. The gas tax does indeed target lower-income folks. And that's exactly why I'm for it. Those same folks are getting a free ride on the federal and state income tax. Why should they get a free ride on the roads as well?

And not all those poor folks are really poor. Consider Tony Soprano, that fictional character

who drives that giant SUV down the Pulaski Skyway on TV. Tony may not be real, but I know plenty of guys like him. They make most of their money off the books and don't pay income tax on it. But they can't get around the gas tax.



**PAUL  
MULSHINE**

The time I waste sitting in traffic is worth more to me than the few extra pennies I might pay at the pump. Just up the corner from my house, for example, is a perennially bottlenecked intersection that could be fixed easily with the addition of a right-turn lane. I'm sure you could name a dozen such intersections in your neck of the woods — or bottleneck of the woods, if I may coin a phrase.

I discussed this last week with a guy who has studied it in great detail, Martin Robins of the Alan M. Voorhees Transportation Center at Rutgers University. New Jersey has been putting off maintenance and upgrades for its transportation system for decades, says Robins. He could name off the top of his head just three projects — including that venerable Skyway — that together would require almost a billion dollars worth of work. And there's billions of dollars more work to be done all over the state.

As for those people who are honestly poor, I feel sorry for them. But not sorry enough to pay more income tax. If I had my druthers, I'd get rid of the state income tax altogether. But that's another story.

As for the gas tax, I really don't care how high it goes as long as every cent makes my driving quicker and more enjoyable.

A blue-ribbon commission recommended a tax hike of 15 cents a gallon last year to replenish the Transportation Trust Fund. But the politicians shaved that down to 12.5 cents a gallon before dropping the idea until after the next election.

"What we really needed then was something in the low 20-cent range in order to achieve some really significant improvements," said Robins. "A lot of the road paving is behind schedule for rehabilitation. A lot of the largest bridges haven't been attended to. A lot of money is required."

That would be fine with me — as long as we could trust the trust fund. At the moment, we can't. The trust fund began during the Kean administration as a pay-as-you-go system for financing improvements. Jim Florio started borrowing against it in the early 1990s to provide pork for the party. Christie Whitman was even worse. And then of course there was James E. McGreevey, who proposed fixing the trust fund the same way he proposed fixing everything else — by borrowing the money.

But we're in hock up to our hubcaps. Borrowing's out. Everyone in Trenton knows this. And everyone in Trenton knows that a hike in the gas tax is coming after the elections in November.

Fine. But before the election, let's talk about where that money's going to go. If we're going to fill the trust fund, let's fix it first. There's plenty of time to put a referendum on the ballot constitutionally dedicating the gas tax so that the next governor won't be able to loot it the way his predecessors did.

That's something to think about when you're sitting in traffic.

*Paul Mulshine is a Star-Ledger columnist.*