

Be a Co-Sponsor of the Transportation Empowerment Act

Dear Colleague,

When the federal Highway Trust Fund was established by the Highway Revenue Act of 1956, the gas tax was raised from two to three cents per gallon, creating an appropriate dedicated revenue stream with a clear connection to the creation of the interstate highway system. This mission is largely accomplished – and it's high time we reduce the portion of road construction funded by the federal government. That is why I ask your support for the Transportation Empowerment Act.

Congress first authorized an investigation into what would become the “Dwight D. Eisenhower National System of Interstate and Defense Highways” in 1938’s Federal Highway Act by directing a report of the “findings and recommend[ed] feasibility of building, and cost of, superhighways not exceeding three in number, running in a general direction from the eastern to the western portion of the United States, and not exceeding three in number, running from the northern to the southern portion of the United States, including the feasibility of a toll system on such roads.”

Following was a more formal blueprint in the National Interstate and Defense Highways Act of 1956, which authorized the construction of 41,000 miles of highway. The originally authorized highways, and many others, have by and large been completed since that time, leading to largely positive changes in how we travel, where we live, and how goods are shipped from place to place.

The creation of the interstate highway system is clearly an authorized role for the federal government under the Commerce Clause. However, it is high time that we reevaluate the ever expanding federal role in the construction of state and local highways. A federal bureaucracy in Washington is expensive, unfair, and redundant. States like Georgia are donor states – meaning while Georgians pay for roads with their federal gas taxes, many of those roads are built elsewhere. And while some states receive what seems like a windfall when they get more back than they pay in, those states still lose, since their money goes to support an additional layer of federal red tape.

Decisions about how to pay for roads and where to build them are best made in the states – not in Washington. That is why I am introducing the Transportation Empowerment Act, which reduces the federal gas tax from the current 18.4 cents per gallon to 3.7 cents per gallon over the next five years, allowing states to determine the funding level that best suits them, while ensuring that funds are still available for necessary maintenance.

To co-sponsor this legislation, please contact Jason Murphy in Representative Graves’ office at jason.murphy2@mail.house.gov or 5-5211.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Tom". The signature is stylized, with a long horizontal stroke above the letters.

Tom Graves
Member of Congress



Should the federal gas tax be extended? No

By Tom Graves

No: Feds have mishandled gas-tax revenues, mistreated Georgia.

Envision a mafialike scheme. The federal government shows up uninvited and says, “Hey Georgia, ya gotta keep your highways in good shape, but since we’re lookin’ out for ya, we’re gonna hold onto your highway money until it’s time to spend it, understand?”

When the time comes to start projects, the federal government hands Georgia an envelope of cash, but it seems a little thin. The feds explain that they’re actually looking out for a lot of friends and need to keep some of Georgia’s cash to “reward some people and make sure everyone has some nice things, so fugetaboutit.”

As absurd as it sounds, that’s exactly what happens to Georgia because of the Highway Trust Fund. Over fiscal 2005-09, Georgians lost \$839 million of our gas-tax revenue, receiving back just 89 percent of what we put into the fund. The rest was doled out by the federal government for projects in other states.

Since the fund’s inception in 1956, Georgia’s average return on dollars invested has been 84.8 percent. Nicer folks call us a “donor state.” I say the feds have gotten away with highway robbery.

Fifty-five years ago, President Dwight Eisenhower worked with Congress to create the Highway Trust Fund to construct our interstate highway system. The original plan called for a 16-year gas tax of 3 cents per gallon in order to pay for the entire project. The tax was to drop to 1.5 cents per gallon in 1972.

Well, the gas tax never declined, and instead was raised and extended many times until reaching the 18.4 cents per gallon tax we know today. It’s reasonable to expect such an enormous, nationwide plan to require extra time and funding, but after so many years, I think most would agree that the interstate highway system is complete and the central government’s job is done. Clearly, we need steady funding to maintain and expand our highways, but are federal bureaucrats the right people to manage that money?

I believe the federal government has mishandled our gas-tax revenues and mistreated states such as Georgia, and it’s not hard to understand why. A big pile of money in Washington is like flypaper for political agendas, lobbyists, special interests and earmarks. The Highway Trust Fund is no exception, and it’s being drained for projects that have absolutely nothing to do with highways.

One example of misuse is how a troika of Big Government all-stars — the Department of Transportation, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the Department of Housing and Urban Development — have teamed up to advance something called the Livability Initiative.

Essentially, they’ve decided your neighborhood needs some touching up, so they’ve started taking money from highways and giving it to smaller local projects such as bike paths, sidewalks, scenic byways and decorative flower arrangements for medians. But the livability plan is small potatoes compared to the many rail programs, commuter-transit projects, bridges to nowhere and administrative costs that soak up our highway dollars.

According to the Heritage Foundation, about 38 percent of our highway funding went to nonhighway projects in fiscal 2009.

With Washington currently overwhelmed by so many of its own mistakes, highway funding is one issue that can and should be handed back to the states.

One mechanism to accomplish that is the Transportation Empowerment Act [S. 1164], which would empower states to control their own highway programs and strictly limit federal involvement to projects that have a national purpose. Over a five-year transition period, the federal gas tax would drop to 3.7 cents per gallon, which would allow states to adjust their own gas tax rates and keep nearly all of the resulting revenue.

For Georgia, a plan like this means more funding, flexibility and authority to do what’s best for us, and freedom from federal mandates.

Congressman Tom Graves. R-Ga., represents the 9th District.

<http://www.ajc.com/opinion/should-the-federal-gas-1175599.html>