

M-DOT hears about roads and taxes

By Tim Richard
staff writer

Since big trucks are damaging Michigan's roads they should be taxed more and their sizes reduced, the Michigan Department of Transportation was told last week.

"Trucks pay five cents a gallon tax on diesel fuel (compared to 11 cents the gasoline-buying public pays) and do the damage," John DeLora of the Michigan Association of Railroad Passengers said.

"Michigan has the highest truck weights in the nation," added David H. Brickey, legislative agent for the United Transportation Union, which represents railroad workers.

"It's the 26,000-pound trucks, not the 3,000-pound cars, tearing up the highways," said Brickey. "Michigan must reduce the weights of trucks."

"FIRST," said Michael J. Wild, public relations director of the Automobile Club of Michigan, "heavy trucks cause significantly more highway damage than do automobiles."

"Many studies show that they do not currently pay their fair share of road taxes. Auto Club urges higher user taxes on trucks to reflect this difference in impact."

Wild contrasted the five-cent tax diesel truckers pay to the 11-cent tax gasoline buyers pay.

The Auto Club, he said, feels that trucks should pay at least the same tax rate on diesel fuel that motorists pay on gasoline.

THE HEARING, one of eight being held around the state, drew about two dozen persons to the State Fair Grounds last week.

While the state's role in transportation — airports, highways, intercity buses, public transit, non-motorized trails, ports and harbors — is under the microscope, most attention was devoted to deteriorating roads.

"Revenues were down 7.5 percent in 1981," said Bob Adams, M-DOT staffer who conducted the meeting, "while maintenance costs were up 15 percent."

"Maintenance is eating up our revenue. The state's role will be reduced to basic maintenance by 1985. That means fewer trains and buses and less snow removal."

Adams outlined the alternatives as:

- Raise revenue, perhaps by taxing gasoline per dollar instead of per gallon, so that revenues rise as prices rise.

- Shift funds between modes (e.g., buses and trains), although state law says 90 percent of transportation taxes must go to roads.

- Less service.

THE IDEA of raising the gasoline tax rate to offset the revenue decline caused by more efficient cars got a mixed review from the public.

DeLora of the rail passengers group supported a percentage tax on gasoline.

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But Wild of the Auto Club said, "The public's anti-tax mood is well known, and we are confident that if Michigan's motorists had a vote, they would not approve an increase in the taxes they pay to own and drive cars."

Some supported preservation of bus transportation and more money for maintenance of existing roads.

A Roseville woman complained that Macomb County's social services — ADC and welfare offices and services to the aged — were located miles beyond existing bus routes. She asked for better bus service.

DeLora, representing the rail passengers, said the number of persons using rail service in Michigan is rising faster than the national average.

"I'm disturbed by the strength of the highway organizations," said DeLora. "County road commissions have representatives on every advisory board — including rail, which they know nothing about."

State Rep. Jeff Padden, D-Wyandotte, put a priority on "preserving the existing highway system rather than expanding it." Padden said he would offer amendments to state laws to require that 90 percent of road money go into maintenance, reduce the state's share of gasoline and weight taxes, and beef up the share going to counties, cities and villages.

ADAMS REPLIED, "Highways have life cycles — about 20 years. The highways built in the 1950s and '60s are coming to the end of their life cycles."

In Michigan, he said, the problem is compounded by the moderate climate, which causes freeze-and-thaw cycles that crack up roads.

"By 1985, we will have money only for regular maintenance. That does not include resurfacing and reconstruction. We are on a treadmill: spending money patching potholes, so there's nothing left for reconstruction."

"We lose \$20 million a year in negligence suits due to poor design of highways," Adams said.

FARMINGTON HILLS resident Mary Runk, asking that more be spent on reconstruction and rehabilitation, said she was "concerned for roads going further and further west, while older cities like Berkeley and Birmingham decline."

She was pleased at Adams' reply that there was no likelihood M-275 would actually be built, despite the M-DOT staff's high priority on building the north-south freeway from Novi to Clarkston.

A representative of the city of Burton suggested state expenses be trimmed by using dimmer lighting on urban freeways except at interchanges.

Adams replied that it had been done, "but more lawsuits were the result."

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