

# **ROGER A. WENTZ: Funding our highways should be a priority**

From the Torrington (Conn.) Register-Citizen

Saturday, September 26, 2009

A couple of weeks ago I was back in town to celebrate my mom's 99th birthday. I hadn't been "home" in over a year and it was great to breathe a little New England air. One thing I noticed, however, is that a lot of my home state's roads could use some repairs. And the funding for those repairs might very well come from the Federal-aid highway program which is now hung up in Congress.

Every time we fill up at the pump we are paying a federal user fee of 18.4 cents per gallon, in addition to the individual state fees. The last highway bill, called the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act – A Legacy for Users, known as SAFETEA-LU for short, set the formulas for distribution of that user fee back to the states. This program is like the farm bill; it needs to be renewed every six years. The current expiration date is September 30.

You would think this would be a pretty simple job, but as a result of falling revenue, rising prices, and political infighting, there is no way it will get done on time. The last time this user-fee was raised was 1993. Since then it's purchasing power has been seriously eroded by inflation in the prices of commodities that comprise our roadways and bridges.

U.S. House of Representatives member James Oberstar (D-MN), chair of the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, has put forth a bold new plan to streamline some 75 Federal-aid programs into four categories and add some serious accountability to these programs, something that has been missing in the past. Of particular interest to those of us in the roadway safety field is his proposal to double the amount going to save lives on our roadways. This is a pretty important proposition given that we have lost an average of 40,000 lives a year over the past 10 years; the equivalent of 80 fully loaded 747 aircraft every year!

Additionally, we need to spend billions of dollars more just to maintain our roadways in their current condition, let alone improve them. Where is the money going to come from? The only answer is roadway users. And, we're going to have to "ante up" in one fashion or another, either by paying a little more at the pump or going to a tax based on miles travelled.

Right now the Obama administration and the U.S. Senate have proposed an 18 month "extension" of the current program with no changes in funding levels. Bad idea. We'll just fall further and further behind. Chairman Oberstar has grudgingly accepted a three month extension realizing that Congress doesn't get much done on time.

Why should the average citizen care? Every billion dollars in roadway spending supports about 35,000 jobs. This includes not only highway workers, but manufacturers, contractors, the grocery store and others that benefit from worker spending. Couldn't Connecticut use a few of these jobs now?

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