



Proposal gives voters a say on gas-tax increase

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AUSTIN — If you're willing to pay a little more for gasoline for highway improvements, Senate Finance Committee Chairman Steve Ogden wants to give you that chance.

The Bryan Republican isn't proposing a straight-ahead state gas-tax increase. Instead, he plans to offer an amendment to the Texas Constitution to say lawmakers can raise the gas tax a few cents a gallon to pay off debt service for road bonds financed through the highway fund.

The proposed amendment, which Ogden plans to push in the coming regular legislative session, would require a two-thirds vote from lawmakers plus voter approval statewide.

“Going with a constitutional amendment does a couple of things. It provides some political cover for people who don't want to be responsible for raising taxes, and it gives the voters a legitimate option: If you want us to continue to borrow money to improve the highways, this is how we propose to pay for it,” Ogden said. “And whatever their answer is, I'd accept.”

Ogden's idea is another sign of the seriousness of the money problems facing transportation, with the gas-tax-fueled highway fund projected to run out of money for new projects in 2012.

The increase would apply only to Proposition 14 bonds, which are paid off by the highway fund. The Texas Department of Transportation has authority to issue \$6 billion in such bonds; it has issued \$4.6 billion.

According to TxDOT, the state is expected to pay \$272.5 million from the \$6.45 billion highway fund for debt service in the 2011 fiscal year and nearly \$290 million in 2012. Between 2013 and 2032, debt service for the bonds will cost more than \$400 million a year.

The 20-cent-a-gallon state motor-fuels tax hasn't been raised since 1991; efforts to increase it have been seen as politically risky. Each penny yields about \$155 million, with one-fourth going to education. Ogden would propose having the extra pennies fund only debt.

Ogden is still working on the details of the proposal but said he expects to limit the amount the tax could be raised to pay off debt — perhaps at a nickel-a-gallon cap — “to give people some comfort that we're not going to go crazy.”

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The arts might be used to getting kicked around during tough budget times. But history too? The limited-government Texas Public Policy Foundation, in proposing ways to bridge a budget shortfall estimated at up to \$18 billion, advises cutting “redundant” state agencies, much “like a household that rids itself of luxury items when income falls.” Two agencies that TPPF puts in that category are the Texas Commission on the Arts and the Texas Historical Commission.

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It's week 12 of waiting for GOP Gov. Rick Perry to agree to a debate since Democratic rival Bill White released his income tax returns for the time he served as Houston mayor. Perry says he won't debate unless White also releases returns from his time as deputy energy secretary under President Bill Clinton and as Democratic Party chairman.

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