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Port expansion shows state is committed

By Ray LaHood

Imagine if you had to live today on the same salary you made in 1993. The cost of everything has gone up, but your paycheck can't keep up. If you went to see one of the most popular movies in 1993 — "Schindler's List" — your ticket cost \$4. Today, a movie costs three times as much. Back then, you bought a gallon of milk for \$2.85, but today it costs \$3.55. And gasoline averaged \$1.11 a gallon in 1993, while today it is \$3.50.

It would be impossible to maintain your lifestyle if your salary hadn't moved an inch in more than 20 years. You and the nation's gas tax would now share the same pain. The 18.4 cents-per-gallon federal gas tax hasn't changed a penny since 1993. In inflation-adjusted terms, the gas tax has lost a third of its purchasing power and is worth only 11.5 cents today.

This is not just a lesson about inflation. This is important because the federal gas tax is the only revenue source for the Highway Trust Fund, which maintains our nation's roads and bridges. Over the past 21 years, cars have become much more fuel-efficient, and hybrids and electric vehicles that use little or no gas are on the rise. Between more fuel-efficient cars and a gas tax that is limping along, the Highway Trust Fund is running on empty.

An empty trust fund would have direct consequences in every state including Georgia, where federal funding accounts for 76 percent of the state's highway capital program. Georgia has at risk \$1.2 billion in federal highway funding, 20,000 jobs and 358 projects, such as the 20-mile highway widening project in Clinch and Ware counties and the managed lanes project on I-85 in Gwinnett County.

Fortunately, Congress took action late last month to patch the trust fund, which had been projected to run dry in August. But instead of increasing revenue for the long term, Congress punted and only provided a temporary reprieve for another 10 months.

Instead of waiting until we reach another crisis point in May, Congress has an opportunity to take decisive action and provide a long-term and sustainable solution when it returns to Washington for a lame duck session after the November elections.

Congress could stave off this crisis by increasing revenue to the trust fund through a modest 10-cent increase in the gasoline tax and indexing it to inflation. Such an increase would generate an additional \$15 billion annually to allow the trust fund to continue to fix and modernize our roads and bridges.

As a former elected official, I fully understand the difficult politics of raising revenue. But while policymakers in Congress sit on their hands and the highway trust fund runs on fumes, governors and local officials have been making tough decisions and raising money to address their own local transportation challenges.

Last year, six governors approved legislation that raised either the state gasoline tax or sales tax — in states led by Democrats and Republicans. The public understands the importance of smart infrastructure spending and approved 91 percent of the ballot initiatives that sought to raise funds in last November's elections. This year, an additional six states have introduced bills or put forth proposals to raise their gas tax or index it to inflation.

My colleagues in state governments are making tough decisions, and that includes policymakers in Georgia. I recently spent a day in Atlanta, where I met with the Legislative Study Committee charged with examining the state's transportation challenges and making recommendations to the General Assembly. I reminded committee members that for Georgia to attract business and economic development and provide jobs, it must have a first-rate infrastructure, and that smart and strategic investments are critical to achieving these goals.

Georgia has already made great strides by investing resources into modernizing the Port of Savannah. This was made possible in large part because a Republican governor and Democratic mayor joined forces and got behind a plan.

Congress could learn a valuable lesson from Georgia's example. The years of kicking the can down the pothole-filled road must end. Congress needs to make a real and sustainable long-term fix for funding America's transportation system. The economic prosperity of Georgia and our nation depends upon it.

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