

U.S. must boost gas tax, transportation expert says

More federal money needed for aging roads and bridges

By Michael Dresser

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The executive director of an influential group representing top transportation officials from around the country told a Greater Baltimore Committee summit Thursday that it is time for the United States to “grow up” and increase the federal tax on gasoline and other motor fuels.

John Horsley, executive director of the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, warned that without new revenue, the U.S. transportation infrastructure faces a grim future.

“We’re in the soup,” Horsley warned the gathering of Baltimore business leaders, transportation officials and civic activists.

Horsley, whose organization represents state transportation secretaries and other top officials, noted that the 18.4 cents per gallon federal gas tax has remained level since the early 1990s and that the national highway trust fund is heading for depletion in August.

In recent years, Congress and presidents have been unwilling to take on the politically charged task of seeking more money for infrastructure as construction costs have risen. Meanwhile, revenues have fallen as a recession-induced decline in driving and a shift to fuel-efficient vehicles have taken a toll on gas tax receipts.

While AASHTO is not well-known to most Americans, engineers in every state use its manuals and guidelines in the construction of roads, bridges, culverts, tunnels and other highway features.

Horsley noted that two recent bipartisan commissions created by Congress concluded that federal fuel taxes must in-

crease. One backed a rise of 25 to 40 cents; the other urged an increase of 10 cents a gallon on gasoline and 15 cents on diesel.

Those recommendations were opposed by the Bush administration, and President Barack Obama has ruled out any increase in gas taxes during the recession.

But Horsley said Thursday that a 10-cent increase in the gas tax amounts to “less than 60 bucks” a year for the typical driver.

“Somewhere out there soon, Congress is going to have to face the facts that you can’t borrow into the future forever,” he said. “On a long-term basis, we’ve got to grow up and raise taxes.”

However, Horsley conceded, “We don’t think it’s in the cards this year to raise the fuel taxes.” He predicted that any effort to raise taxes for transportation would not get a single Republican vote in the House.

Without new revenue, Horsley said, Congress must transfer \$5 billion to \$7 billion to replenish the highway trust fund during the current fiscal year or watch as road projects grind to a halt. He said \$8 billion to \$10 billion would be needed for the fiscal year that begins in October.

Obama and others have called for passage of an 18-month stopgap funding measure, saying that Congress has its plate full with health care, energy and other issues.

Rep. Elijah E. Cummings, who also addressed the summit, said he and other House leaders disagree with Obama and want to pass a broader bill this year.

The Baltimore Democrat said the United States has put off investing in its infrastructure needs for too long, noting Monday’s fatal crash on Washington’s Metro subway system and the collapse of an interstate bridge in Minnesota in 2007.

But Cummings said that with unemployment hovering around 9 percent, it would be “difficult” to raise the gas tax.

“We’re in a mess,” he said.

