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COMMENTARY

Down the Road to a Driving Tax

By Alan Thein Durning,

Americans, and Californians above all, live in a motor-head democracy. More adults hold driver's licenses than voter cards, and taxes on automobiles have been disappearing as fast as Democrats from the U.S. Senate. Red, blue and even Golden states have rushed to slash vehicle taxes, even as Hummers have flooded the highways.

So it was news this week when Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger — the bane of California car fees — nominated Joan Borucki to lead the Department of Motor Vehicles. Borucki, the media quickly revealed, was on record as supporting a tax on driving. That's right — a tax on every mile driven in the state! And it might be collected by tracking devices in cars or by spy satellites overhead! That, at least, was the tone of some of the media coverage.

The back story, as usual, is much more nuanced. Borucki's position turns out to be as middle-of-the-road as a double-yellow line, and it's only one of a menu of innovative transportation taxes that states will opt — or be forced — to turn to in the future. Here's the rub: The gas tax cannot collect enough money to keep up with needed road work because vehicle technology is hurtling toward alternatives, such as plug-in hybrids and fuel cells, that rarely need refueling. California's motor vehicle emissions standards for greenhouse gases are hastening the arrival of these fuel-sippers, and the faster they arrive the more quickly gas-tax dollars will evaporate.

So in recent years, when representatives of Big Transportation get together, the subject that most rouses their passion is how to keep paying for roads. The emerging, bipartisan consensus? A different kind of tax: user fees such as tolls and mileage charges.

New, "phantom tollbooth" technology allows toll collection without stopping. In the best of these systems, overhead scanners mounted on scaffolding debit the appropriate charge from a prepaid "smart card" on your dashboard. On highways such as Orange County's 91 Freeway and Interstate 15 in San Diego, such a system is already in place, and the fees vary with the volume of traffic — you get a break if you travel when those routes are less crowded.

But one-route-at-a-time tolling cannot fund the construction and upkeep of an entire highway network. The only hope of doing that is through comprehensive regional or even statewide systems. In my home city of Seattle, a pilot project is trying to perfect wireless tolling that covers the entire metropolitan area. Each of the 500 vehicles in the pilot

project will have an onboard "taxi meter" that announces and deducts from a prepaid account the price for driving each street, based on congestion.

Researchers at Oregon State University are testing the technology for another approach, and it's closer to what Borucki has suggested. There, tamper-proof electronic odometers would use satellite positioning systems to tally every mile everyone drives. At fuel-up time, the odometer transfers the mileage charge to your gas bill.

The ultimate promise of such technologies is that they allow society to bring the price of driving closer to its true cost. Mileage fees could vary so that it's not only more costly to drive during rush hour, but to have a heavier car (which results in more road wear and risk to other motorists) or to have a car that pollutes more (and consequently damages the environment and others' health).

Privacy advocates are right to fret about tracking systems in the hands of Big Brother. But these systems can be controlled so that they do not create a central registry of vehicles' whereabouts. Meanwhile, most of the necessary technology — Global Positioning System devices and transponders, for example — already are installed in the navigation systems of luxury cars and in half of new GM vehicles. Two enormous side benefits for consumers are insurance savings for those who drive less (insurers already are beginning to offer these for GPS satellite-verified mileage reductions) and theft proofing. If your satellite-linked car is stolen — or your teenager is out in it after curfew — you'll know exactly where to look. One British company even offers a service that allows you to disable your vehicle remotely.

In the context of technological change, and amid the urgent discussions about paying for transportation infrastructure, Borucki is no radical. In fact, her go-slow, mileage-only charging idea makes her a centrist. Many in the highway-industrial complex want to add mileage taxes on top of state gas taxes. She wants to eliminate the fuel tax entirely, which would likely keep driving fees about the same as they are now (about a penny a mile). That should be red meat to all motor-head citizens.

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