

User fees are the best way to go

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I don't give it a second thought when I'm asked to pay an entrance fee to enter Yellowstone National Park. After all, the park's resources and facilities must be maintained and there is elemental justice attached to this fee because I'm the person using the park, not someone 1,000 miles away.

Similarly, I don't object to paying an admission fee to Old Dominion University basketball games, or paying for a spot to park on campus, even though we all know ODU is a publicly assisted institution. Once again, I use the services and receive the benefits, so why shouldn't I bear most of the cost?

Somehow the fundamental justice associated with user fees gets lost when we begin to talk about how to pay for our roads. Many individuals believe they should not have to pay for the extent to which they drive on public roadways, even though they know their own use gradually causes our roads to deteriorate and even though they know these same roads may be essential to their keeping their current jobs, or even to drive to church.

I can understand (though not completely agree with) someone who argues, "I don't even own a car, so I shouldn't pay." While I'd argue every citizen benefits from an efficient road system (even bed-ridden individuals rely upon our road system to deliver their food and medicine), one can understand the argument of an individual who doesn't want to pay for things she chooses not to use.

That's why transportation user fees are so attractive (at least relative to the alternatives). If I'm going to pay for something, I'd like it to be an item that I use and value rather than something I care nothing about. Transportation user fees (tolls, gas taxes) can be avoided completely by someone who chooses not to drive or avoided partially by someone who decides to drive less, use a more fuel efficient car, carpool, cyber commute or use public transportation.

Thus, those who pay transportation user fees do so because of their own choice-making and decisions. This impresses me as a rather good way to do things because it leaves things up to us and we can change our choices at any time.

But user fees have other benefits. They'll cause us to drive fewer miles. This

will moderate highway congestion, reduce highway deaths and even dampen carbon dioxide emissions. We'll be stimulated to purchase more fuel efficient vehicles. Not such a bad combination. Note that increasing the state's income tax or sales tax or imposing a grab bag of other taxes to pay for transportation improvements would yield virtually none of these benefits.

Of course, one can argue that we don't need any additional revenue because we don't really need to maintain or improve our roads. However, this is a failing argument to anyone who faces increasing congestion in his commute, or who thinks we need adequate evacuation routes when we face natural disasters, or who believes the presence of the military in Hampton Roads is partially dependent upon a viable road system.

Thus, the real question is how we should pay for repairing our pot holes and building the new roads we need. User fees easily are the best way to go. They provide us with incentives to change our behavior (and thereby avoid paying so much) even while they raise revenue.

True, user fees (especially gas taxes) don't have lots of political sex appeal, but then legitimate, long-term solutions to tough problems seldom do. It would be a mistake to kid ourselves that somehow we will find a painless solution to our transportation challenges that will magically be paid for by "someone else." A variety of elected officials seem to be pursuing that strategy. Let's get real. There's no free lunch to be found in the transportation arena. Let's increase user fees and stop digging our transportation hole even deeper.