

EDITORIALS

Daily Herald

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IN OUR VIEW

Don't fiddle with gas tax

Utahns should hope that state lawmakers don't try to force motorists to pay more at the pump — especially right now. Gasoline prices have slipped well below \$2 a gallon, which is a welcome respite from the \$4-plus fuel of summer. But the economic slowdown is draining state coffers.

Perhaps most worrisome, the dip in revenue has prompted the Department of Transportation to put a hold on \$4 billion of road work. That includes the local rebuild of Interstate 15, plus the arterial roads needed to prevent strangulation of traffic flow across Utah Valley.

These new or improved roads are needed both by Utah County and by the state as a whole. Delaying the work is self-defeating, if only for the fact that costs rise as time elapses. But there's another reason: Utah needs good roads to ensure that the economy doesn't bog down even worse.

To fund highways, the Huntsman administration is pondering a change in how the gas tax is calculated. One idea is that drivers, rather than paying a set rate of 24.5 cents per gallon as they do now, would pay a percentage of the sale price, the same method used for most sales taxes.

If that sounds like a distinction without a difference, read on. It's a booby-trap for getting more money out of your wallet.

In theory, of course, a percent-of-price levy might not amount to any more than you're paying now. But if that's the intention of state leaders, there'd be no point messing with it. The idea has come up for a reason, folks.

If the price of gas goes up, guess what? The amount of tax you pay will go up, too. With the current tax per gallon, it's a flat rate.

To simplify, say that this new percent-of-price tax were put at 12 percent. At today's pump prices, that's cheaper than the 24.5-cent "flat tax" Utah has now. But if the price goes back to \$3 a gallon, the tax soars to 36 cents. At \$4 a gallon, motorists would be forking over 48 cents for every gallon they bought.

Who can forget that it was only a few months ago that we were

paying such prices? Experts were predicting it would go up much further.

A percentage-based gas tax would come with a built-in escalator for the future.

Beyond this horrible characteristic, the gas tax is an unfair levy to begin with. It puts a disproportionate load on drivers, especially truckers, because good highways benefit all Utahns, no matter how much or little they drive.

To understand that, it's necessary to rebut some of the arguments for the gas tax. In this debate, the gas tax is sometimes compared to a user fee, with the motorists being the users. But, properly considered, a user fee benefits only specific people. If I pay a fee to use a campground, for example, I'm the only person using it.

A percentage-based gas tax would come with a built-in escalator for the future

Good roads benefit everyone. The state's economy depends on the smooth flow of materials, products, workers and customers. Companies won't move here, or stay here, if traffic becomes unbearable. (Look at California for one example.)

Even those who don't drive benefit from good highways. Take the fellow who walks everywhere he goes. His sandals were carried to a Utah store by truck. Even if you ride the bus to get to work, you benefit because city streets are less clogged when I-15 carries more traffic. Maybe you bicycle to your doctor's office — but he or she may be able to get there only by car.

We all eat. And our food is transported over the roads to grocery stores and restaurants. The cost of that transportation is reflected in the cost of the products. Examples could be multiplied many times over. Good roads benefit everyone, so we all should bear the cost. One option for doing that might be increasing the amount of the state sales tax that's funneled to transportation. That and similar steps that yoke everyone more or less equally would be better for funding highways than fuel taxes.

On top of all that, it's a bad time to slam Utah's drivers again at the fuel pump. That's why Utahns should hope that lawmakers agree with House Speaker-elect Dave Clark (R-Santa Clara) when he referred to a new gas tax: "That is a desperate last resort, and I'm a long ways from that position."

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LETTERS

Shoppers out of control

This is in comment to the carnage that merchants encourage by their questionable business practices. Every year stories come out in the evening news after thousands of shoppers are enticed to throw away their manners and civility and become one of the animals that fight to get the sale items offered the first four hours in the morning that day after Thanksgiving.

Unfortunately this came true for a man in New York who died today as the result of a shopping crowd that completely lost control, leaving this 39-year-old man dead. Also injured was a pregnant woman.

It is an embarrassment to our nation that this has been allowed to continue for all these years. It was only a matter of time before someone lost his or her life.

If the stores are going to encourage this kind of crowd, they need to

provide the security to keep it under control. They also need to take financial responsibility for the injuries incurred.

This is a call to our legislators and local law enforcement agencies that something needs to be done to make merchants responsible. If you think things like this are not happening right here in our community, you need to take a closer look.

Debra Hortt,
Pleasant Grove

LOCAL OPINION

Higher education enrollment and the economy

Elizabeth J. Hitch

Since its inception in 1941, UVU's faculty and staff have been dedicated to meeting the educational and economic development needs of the region — offering quality education at an affordable price. The community has responded and thousands have come streaming through our open doors seeking opportunity.

This fall, 26,696 students are enrolled at UVU. That translates into an increase of more than 2,800 students this year alone. Overall, student enrollment is up 12 percent from a year ago, making UVU the fastest-growing school in the Utah System of Higher Education. In addition to new and transfer students, UVU experienced nearly an eight percent increase in continuing students this fall — evidence that more and more students are staying at UVU all four years. Transfer student enrollment is up 30 percent. Furthermore, consistent with the changing population of our regional service area, UVU's student body continues to grow more diverse, with 25-percent and 33-percent jumps in enrollment of Hispanic and African-American students, respectively. With our first master's program now in place, UVU also welcomed its very first group of graduate students in the field of education.

While these milestones are significant and have caught the attention of many, we feel strongly that much of our popularity is and will continue to be the direct result of the brand of education students receive at UVU. The ways in which our faculty and staff engage both students and community in the learning process are part of a phenomenally successful model, but one that, like all education, requires funding. Despite having the lowest square footage per student in the state, the university is providing world-class education to Utah students, sending graduates out into the world armed with both a diploma and a resume. But in a time of sharp enrollment increases and even sharper budget cuts, this quality of education is threatened.



THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR

Higher education enrollment is up this year, not just at UVU, but throughout the state. Colleges and universities statewide are facing a wave of future enrollments as the growing student population in the K-12 ranks moves into higher education. During times of economic duress and uncertainty, citizens and policymakers must remain committed to supporting higher education's role in fueling the state's long-term economic success. As UVU graduates — and graduates from other Utah colleges and universities — enter Utah's workforce, the Utah economy is strengthened. Last year, 87 percent of UVU's graduates remained in Utah. Utah's economic viability depends on a highly educated and well-trained workforce, and by investing in higher education, we're investing in the state's economy.

At Utah Valley University, we're proud to be educating nearly 27,000 engaged learners, who will ultimately become direct contributors to Utah's economy.

Elizabeth J. Hitch is interim president of Utah Valley University

How to comment

We invite readers to share their thoughts. You can:

Go to www.heraldextra.com and find the "submit a letter" link under the Opinions tab, or under "Reader Services;" e-mail letters to dhletters@heraldextra.com; fax to 344-2985; mail to P.O. Box 717, Provo, UT, 84603

So letters can be verified, writers must include their full name, address, and daytime phone number. (Street addresses and phone numbers will not be published.)

We prefer shorter letters, 100 to 200 words. Letters may be edited for length.

Because of the volume of responses, we cannot acknowledge unpublished letters.

Letters become the property of the Daily Herald.

MEDIA VOICES

Gift card caution

From the Kansas City Star, Friday, Nov. 28:

Gift cards can be useful for holiday shoppers, especially when it comes to that distant cousin nobody knows very well. But the cards carry some risks, and consumers should take the time to consider them.

With the economy in a tailspin, the financial status of a company becomes important because of the limited protection given to holders of their gift cards.

A card purchased from a company that files for bankruptcy may lose some or all its value.

In addition, it may be difficult to redeem a card if a retail chain closes down some of its locations, although the advent of Internet shopping has surely alleviated this somewhat.

Opting for gift cards that can be used in a wide variety of locations, such as those issued by

shopping malls or major credit card companies, helps avoid the possibility of a card losing its value if a particular retailer disappears.

But though these gift cards offer more protection for consumers, they often come with potential fees.

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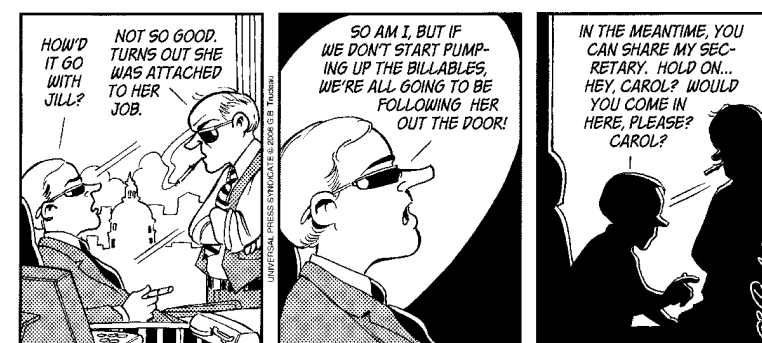
If a card isn't completely used after a year, for example, it may have a certain amount subtracted from it, with more fees exacted in succeeding years.

Under Kansas law, for example, these fees can't begin until at least a year after a card is bought, and customers must be informed of them at the time of purchase. But not everyone is aware of these fees.

Be sure to tell card recipients about them.

It is frustrating to find an old gift card only to discover it has lost all of its value. And for those who are afraid cards may get set aside and forgotten, there's always cash.

DOONESBURY • Garry Trudeau



MALLARD FILLMORE • Bruce Tinsley

