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**For whom the drive tolls - no more 'free cheese'**

Until now, Texas has always followed the "free-cheese" model of road provision. Some years ago, clever bureaucrats decided the best way to get rid of federally-owned cheese was to give it away (why the feds owned cheese is a different subject). They announced their intention to do so on certain days.

The result was as predictable as it was inevitable. Thongs showed up for the free cheese, and when the bureaucrats ran out, thongs still remained wanting more free cheese. That, in a nutshell, explains road congestion.

Roads are simply more free stuff "given away" by government. Of course, just like "free" cheese, roads are not really "free." They actually cost a lot, but that doesn't affect the way we use them.

Sure, we all pay gas taxes. Many wrongly dismiss them as user fees.

For a moment, assume we ran shopping malls the same way we operate roads. What if every person who walked into a mall was assessed a fee, then allowed to take merchandise without an additional charge? In no time, malls would be small and the selection would be limited - or non-existent.

Similarly, while road usage in Texas has risen 300 percent, road capacity has increased less than 10 percent. There is a fundamental disconnect between the way we fund and use roads, as compared to almost all other goods and services.

Another problem with the way we fund roads - the gas tax - is that those who mow their lawns and drive cars are heavily subsidizing the trucking industry. Heavy

trucks do the most damage to roads, leading to greater expense.

Trucks do not come close to paying through taxes the costs they impose on the road system. We could increase the diesel tax, but the use of diesel is not limited to heavy trucks.

In addition, gas tax revenues are not keeping up with road needs. The combined state and federal gas tax is 38.4 cents per gallon.

If this was adjusted to account for inflation since the last gas tax increases (1991 for state and 1997 for federal), the combined tax today would be 49.2 cents - an increase of 10.8 cents per gallon! Want that on top of today's already-rising gas prices?

Rising fuel efficiency also erodes gas tax revenues. Better gas mileage is great, but it points up the silliness of continuing to consider a tax on gas as a "road user fee."

For centuries the inefficiencies of tax-funded "free" roads were outweighed by the inefficiencies of toll booths. Today, however, technology makes it possible to eliminate toll booths.

With electronic systems, road pricing can be easily adjusted for axle weight, vehicle size, and time of day to create the most efficient transportation system possible.

In Austin, where a comprehensive toll road plan has been adopted, a strange opposition coalition has arisen. There is the anti-development crowd resisting road construction made possible by tolls, and there is the conservative crowd convinced tolls are double-taxation.

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*Guest  
Commentary*

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