

# Editorial: Start miles-traveled tax study, but as part of comprehensive roads strategy

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The generally decayed and decaying condition of Illinois roads is evident to anyone who uses them, and without more transportation revenue, it's clear things are only going to get worse. Finding that revenue, of course, is the challenge.

The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning offered some alternatives in a release last week, including an increase in the gasoline sales tax and a test of a tax based on how much of the roadway a vehicle uses. Both are conversations we have to have.

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The gas tax -- more formally known as the motor fuel tax or MFT -- is difficult to automatically sign on to in Illinois' troubling, heavy-handed tax climate, but a fundamental flaw in the system seriously needs to be confronted. The tax -- a fixed 19 cents a gallon for typical gasoline and 21.5 cents a gallon for diesel -- hasn't been changed since 1990. As a result, CMAP says, the tax that is the primary support for Illinois' roads and bridges brings in less money nearly every year -- primarily due to the development of fuel-efficient engines and to the rise in electric and hybrid vehicles. CMAP estimates that gas tax revenues in the Chicago region, which amounted to about \$600 million in 2017, will fall to roughly \$450 million by 2050.

Among a variety of reforms, CMAP's [latest comprehensive plan](#), which you can find in draft form at [www.cmap.illinois.gov/](http://www.cmap.illinois.gov/), recommends raising the motor fuel tax in the short term by at least 15 cents and tying it to inflation. If the 19 cents tax imposed in 1990 had been tied to inflation, the Illinois Economic Policy Institute says it would be 31 cents today.

Then for the long term, CMAP's planners envision transitioning to a tax that raises money for roads by focusing on how much they are used. That change to a "vehicle miles traveled" -- or VMT -- tax could bring in \$31 billion more between 2019 and 2050 than our current tax would produce, they say. To move in that direction, they want to launch a pilot program in the Chicago area, noting that tests using volunteers in other states have shown promising early results.

These are intriguing ideas -- though not necessarily slam dunks. A gasoline sales tax does, for instance, help account for the added impact of large gas-guzzling vehicles that cause more pollution and increased wear-and-tear on roads compared to smaller, fuel-efficient cars. And, a VMT tax brings difficult issues on collection methods, privacy and fairness across rural, urban and suburban environments.

But CMAP is certainly correct that these ideas need to be explored. A volunteer-based pilot program on VMT for the Chicago area is a good place to begin. The "lockbox" amendment passed in 2016 -- requiring all taxes collected for roads to be spent on roads -- was a start toward stabilizing Illinois' roadwork funding picture, but it won't fill the gaps created by declining fuel consumption and increasing road deterioration. The question is, what will? And then, what is the fairest way to do implement it?

CMAP will officially [launch its ONTO2050 comprehensive plan](#) on Oct. 10 in ceremonies at Chicago's Millennium Park. Its Vehicle Miles Traveled provision might be among the answers. We'll never know for certain unless we test it. We need to get that under way soon so we can incorporate the data we collect into a larger roadwork strategy.