

Pritzker: Expanding gambling for road funds worth a look, but mileage tax too experimental

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Expanding gambling in Illinois could help pay for roads and bridges, J.B. Pritzker told the Daily Herald editorial board, while distancing himself from a politically volatile tax on miles driven.

"We should all agree here ... we need to invest in our infrastructure," the Democratic candidate for governor said Wednesday.

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To pay for it, Illinois Republican Senate Leader Bill Brady had an idea "worthy of us spending time on," Pritzker said. "That is, should we look at expanding gaming in the state or/and legalizing sports betting in the state as a source of revenue for an infrastructure bill?"

As for a tax on vehicle miles traveled, or VMT, an idea Pritzker floated at a Jan. 11 meeting with the editorial board that has been blasted by Republican Bruce Rauner over privacy concerns, Pritzker called the programs being tested in other states "clearly experimental."

"I really do think, we've got to have feasible programs today for paying for infrastructure. It's not good enough to talk about tests of anything," the Hyatt hotel heir said, "because the infrastructure need is so great."

With a VMT program, drivers pay a tax for every mile they drive instead of on the gas they buy. The intent is to recoup gas taxes, needed for the upkeep of highways and bridges, that are being lost as use of hybrid, electric and fuel-efficient vehicles grows.

The VMT concept has been dogged by fears of government surveillance, but a pilot program is successfully operating in Oregon with volunteer drivers who can choose a device with or without GPS to plug into their vehicles. The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning advocates testing it here.

"I think it's something we should look at," Pritzker said on Jan. 11. "We have to be careful about how it gets implemented, and that's why it should only be a test at this point."

Rauner hit his rival with negative ads on the topic, and at a Sept. 20 debate, he said: "(Pritzker) said we should look at putting in a vehicle miles tax. Government putting a box in everyone's car measuring the miles they drive and taxing people to commute to work ... is wrong."

Pritzker on Wednesday said: "The most important thing to me is we need a stable source of revenue, and Bill Brady has proposed an idea that I think is worth looking at. As a new governor in January, right away we've got to start exploring having an infrastructure bill in the first year. I want to get that in place ASAP."

Asked about raising the existing gas tax, Pritzker said, "I don't much like those regressive taxes," a reference to taxes that disproportionately hit people with lower incomes.

Rauner advocated borrowing to jump-start a capital bill and secure matching federal dollars at a Sept. 18 campaign stop in Addison. He also said a stronger economy, public-private partnerships and balanced budgets will fund infrastructure.

"If we combine strong economic growth with public-private partnerships ... we could have private investors finance many of the expansions of our highway system and some of our other transportation systems," said Rauner, a Winnetka venture capitalist.