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Instead of paying tax at gas pump, someday you may pay by the mile

By LUCAS WALL
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PHILADELPHIA - Paying your road taxes in the future might depend more on how much you drive than how much gasoline you pump.

Texas is among a group of states researching how to replace the fuel tax with a fee based on the number of miles traveled — making every road a virtual tollway. Transportation officials from across the world discussed the concept here at last month's annual meetings of the trade groups representing the highway and tollway industries.

Fees for miles traveled would be measured by Global Positioning System receivers embedded in vehicles. The system would track which roads a motorist uses so the virtual tolls could be distributed to the appropriate agency.

Each jurisdiction could set its own per-mile fee. Data would be downloaded from vehicles monthly for billing, or could be transmitted at service stations in lieu of the gas tax.

Jack Lettiere, New Jersey transportation commissioner, said most states are falling short of collecting enough gas-tax revenue to meet mobility needs and they desire a new funding mechanism.

"We're hoping this is a theory that can go into practice," Lettiere said at the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials meeting. "It has a lot of useful benefits."

Researchers love the idea that driving taxes could be adjusted to promote or discourage certain actions. The system could charge more per mile during peak hours, for instance, or add a surcharge for heavy trucks and sport utility vehicles.

Those promoting a mileage-based approach to highway taxes contend driving should be metered and billed according to use.

"Why shouldn't transportation be seen as a utility like electricity, water, etc.?" Hal Worrall, a consultant for Transportation Innovations Inc., asked during a panel at the International Bridge, Tunnel and Toll Road Association conference. "It's perceived as free in America and thus produces a large demand."

David Forkenbrock, director of the University of Iowa Public Policy Center, has been working on a model for

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four years. His research is funded by 15 states, including Texas, and the Federal Highway Administration.

As more hybrid and alternative-power vehicles are built, Forkenbrock said, gas-tax collections will suffer.

"A tax at the point of purchase is inferior to user charges at the exact point of travel," he said, explaining the growth of toll roads in recent years.

Oregon has already tested a mileage-based charge. It starts a pilot project next year with 280 volunteer drivers in Eugene, who will be exempt from fuel taxes in exchange for paying their per-mile assessment.

traffic@chron.com



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