Transportation Decisions for Now and the Future

■ Editorial Cartoon: Tom Toles  |  Cheap Energy
■ Post Editorial: With oil prices low, now’s the perfect time for Congress to raise the gas tax
■ e-Replica Activity: Conduct an Advanced Search  |  Become an Expert
■ Post Reprint: Walkability vs. affordability
■ Student Activity: My Best Place to Live
■ Post Reprint: 5 Myths about Gas Taxes
Public transportation ranks high on the list of priorities for local, state and national leaders. The GROW AMERICA Act, Beyond Traffic 2045, and a national Highway Trust Fund are under the Department of Transportation umbrella. Studies and proposals, and collaborations of private and public organizations join them in seeking answers to managing and replacing aging infrastructure and preparing for future needs.

In this guide, a Post editorial, editorial cartoon and expert opinion on 5 myths about gas taxes are stimulus to discussion of and research into fuel taxes.

News articles and columns address other transportation funding methods, congestion abatement, environmental impact and safe travel. Many sections of The Post are explored for strategies to select a home, find walkable and affordable lifestyle solutions and purchase a vehicle.
Tom Toles  |  January 18, 2015

1. List four details in the editorial cartoon that establish the setting.

2. Who does the one figure represent?

3. When an editorial cartoon is labeled, the editorial cartoonist is giving the reader information to define the issue on which he/she is commenting. What is the issue?

4. Tom Toles indicates that there is a choice (“response”) to be made. How is this reflective of a democracy?

5. Summarize the concerns represented by each choice:
   a. “Save Climate”
   b. “Destroy Climate”

6. What does “Depends how far you want to go” mean?

7. What is the view of Toles’ alter ego presented in the lower right corner?

8. How cheap is “cheap energy”?

9. What is your point of view on “cheap energy”?
With oil prices low, now’s the perfect time for Congress to raise the gas tax

THE PRICE of crude oil dipped below $50 a barrel on Monday. National gasoline prices average a little over $2 a gallon. On principle and on politics, now is the best time Washington has seen in years to raise the federal gas tax.

Congress last year refilled the Highway Trust Fund, which pays for a range of transportation projects across the country, with a familiar strategy: short-term budget gimmickry. Instead of providing local transportation planners with the certainty they need to plan and execute large projects, Congress set the trust fund to run dry again in May. Instead of agreeing on a robust infrastructure policy that invests rationally in the economy, lawmakers scraped another $11 billion from corners of the federal budget.

The reason is simple: Members of Congress don’t want to raise the gas tax, unchanged at 18.4 cents per gallon since 1993. The gas tax operates on a straightforward principle: Those who use the roads should pay for them. But over the past two decades, the value of the revenue the tax produces has dropped by about a third — partly because of inflation and partly because cars have become more fuel-efficient. This constrains the amount of money Congress is willing to put into transportation and encourages overuse of the roads at the expense of the general taxpayer.
Lawmakers could have headed off some of the problem in 1993 by indexing the gas tax to inflation, but they put that responsibility on later congresses, which failed to act responsibly. Now, with lower oil prices, the politics of raising the gas tax should be easier, the potential backlash blunted by Americans who don’t feel as pinched at the pump. True, lower gas prices will stimulate the economy to some degree, and raising the gas tax would reduce that effect. But raising it now would restrain present and future demand for gasoline, encouraging Americans to maintain some of the resilience to oil price volatility that the country built up in recent years — and possibly even checking future price spikes.

Many in Congress understand the case for raising the gas tax, and some are willing to say so. Sen. Chris Murphy (D-Conn.) and Sen. Bob Corker (R-Tenn.) proposed last year to raise the gas tax by 12 cents per gallon over two years, bringing the tax to about the level it would be now if it had grown with inflation. Their plan would also peg the level to future inflation.

The bill didn’t move. But Sen. John Thune (R-S.D.), the new Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee chairman, did not rule out raising the gas tax when asked about it on Sunday. “We have to look at all the options,” he told “Fox News Sunday.” “I don’t think we take anything off the table at this point.”

That’s no ringing endorsement. But it leaves some room for doing the right thing.

— January 6, 2015
Conduct an Advanced Search | Become an Expert

The use of the Search and Advanced Search features of e-Replica can save time, provide easier access to resources on a particular topic and facilitate a lesson in using the Internet for educational purposes.

Go to your e-Replica account. At the top of the page locate the Search tab. Type in a search term in the field and select the time period to search. “Anytime” will get the broadest search, covering the last three months. “Today” will give the narrowest and most current search. “Last 3 days,” “This week,” and “This month” may also be selected.

After the search is completed, The Washington Post e-Replica will present thumbnails of the pages that contain your search term, indicate the number of times the searched word has been mentioned on that page, and highlight this word on the page for easy reference. Students can also narrow their search using “Advanced Query” which is in parentheses next to “Find results:” on the left.

If searching for a phrase, it is best to use quotations marks so that e-Replica knows to search for that exact phrase rather than the individual words in the phrase. Examples: “Cold War,” “Panama Canal,” “School Bus.”

Do the following searches to illustrate the importance of narrowing terms and using quotation marks.

Transportation safety
school bus safety
“school bus”
“school bus safety”

Metro
commuter safety
D.C. Metro rail
“Metro rail safety”

Highway Trust Fund
funding highways
gasoline tax
“gasoline tax”
Students can sort terms by either relevance or date on the right hand side of the list. Set the search for “Relevance.” Skim the list. Switch the search term to “Date.” Skim the list. Determine which is most helpful search for your purpose.

**Now focus on the Advanced Search function.** To begin this activity:

- Select Search option at the top of the screen.
- Scroll to and select “Advanced Search.”
- Under Find Results: Type in your topic in a word or short phrase.
- Under Date: Select “Anytime” or other designated time period

Try these different search topics to practice setting up an advanced search. Practice will help you to learn the importance of using succinct wording and narrowing the search topic to get results that are pertinent to the topic and useful.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Search 1</th>
<th>Search 2</th>
<th>Search 3</th>
<th>Search 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>D.C. Metro bus</td>
<td>Taxi service</td>
<td>automobile safety</td>
<td>pedestrian safety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metro bus commute</td>
<td>Uber</td>
<td>“highway safety”</td>
<td>bicycle safety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Metro bus safety”</td>
<td>“taxi safety”</td>
<td>“accident rate”</td>
<td>“commute by bicycle”</td>
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Frequently one of the biggest factors in deciding where you want to rent or buy a home is price vs. walkability. There are pros and cons to both, so here are some of them.

**Walkable areas are higher in rent or purchase price.**  
- Residents who choose walkable neighborhoods save on transportation costs by having a shorter commute to work. A shorter commute could translate to a savings on public transportation costs. If you can walk to work, you can eliminate the cost of public transportation altogether.

- A house that is in walking distance to shopping and other attractions will cost more to buy, but will yield higher resale value in the future.
- A rental home in a walkable community will also carry a higher price. You just have to make sure that you are saving enough on transportation costs and car expenses to make sense for you to pay the higher rent.

If your job requires you to work longer hours, having an easier shorter commute via public transportation may be one of your more important priorities in a home.

- You may have to compromise on the number of...
bedrooms and square footage of your home to stay within your budget.

- To stay within your budget, you may have to give up your desire for amenities, such as a front desk concierge, a pool and a gym. But the area may offer an affordable gym, tennis courts or pool within walking distance. In some cases, you may have access to public tennis courts, a pool or reasonably priced golf course.

- If you walk to work, your boss might expect you to go to work in a snowstorm because you might be the only person not hindered by commuting problems — breakdowns in the Metro or unplowed roads.

Non-walkable areas offer more space for less money.

- You will get more for your money for purchase or rent in a home in a non-walkable area. You will get more square footage, you will get better prices for parking in a town house or condo community.

- You might be able to afford the pool, gym, golf course or park access in your apartment or condo.

- You might have to spend more money on your transportation costs. As long as your savings in rent or mortgage makes up the difference, then this will make sense. If you have a job that requires you to commute by car, then being close to public transportation might not matter so much to you.

- Your boss will expect that you will have difficulty getting to work in a snowstorm, working from home on a snow day may be your only option.

What really matters most is what your needs are in a home and what makes sense to you financially. If you are able to live closer to work and live on a car-free diet, you just need to make sure the numbers work for you.

If you work farther out in the suburbs and you'd like more space for your money, then you may want to go the nonwalkable route.

It is a good idea to weigh these options and decide what works best for you before choosing the place that will be a wonderful place to call home.

Nancy Simmons Starrs is president and founder of Apartment Detectives, a D.C., Maryland and Northern Virginia apartment search service.

An aerial view of Fariwood shows the sprawling suburb in Prince George's County. Residents have a median household income of more than $170,000, according to the census.

An aerial view of Fariwood shows the sprawling suburb in Prince George's County. Residents have a median household income of more than $170,000, according to the census.
My Best Place to Live

Deciding where to live is a big decision. Income, lifestyle, commute time and expenses, schools and other amenities are all factors to consider. Read “Walkability vs. affordability” for a comparison of the considerations before deciding where to live. Which of the two options appeals the most to you after reading the article? Explain your answer.

Marshall Park wrote in *The Washington Post*’s January 31, 2015, Real Estate supplement that among home buyer’s top five regrets are failure to investigate the neighborhood because they are too focused on the home. He writes:

“If your desire is to live in a buzzing neighborhood, consider the noise level and your threshold for dealing with late-night revelers. Being close to the action is fun, but some buyers learn quickly that it’s possible to be too close.”

Another regret is failure to experience the commute. Park suggests:

“Whether you drive, bike or take public transportation, try out the commute during rush hour both ways to get an accurate sense of your daily routine. Likewise, be honest with yourself about your parking needs now and in the future. Sure, that condo with on-street parking seemed like a great option when you didn’t own a car, but will your lifestyle change?”

*Let’s see what might be the best place for you. Complete the profile. Use it to help you search for a place to live.*

**Create a Profile**

Income: $78,000 per year

Status: ___ single, ___ a couple, ___ married with children

Place of employment: ___ Franklin Square area near 13th Street NW and L Street NW, ___ Capitol Hill area, ___ George Washington University area

Own a personal vehicle: ___ yes, ___ no

**Chart Your Choices**

**LEFT COLUMN:**

Benefits and cost of living in D.C. a walkable distance from your place of employment. Sunny, rainy and snowy weather need to be included.

**RIGHT COLUMN:**

Benefits and cost of living outside of Washington, D.C., commuting to your place of employment.
Deciding on a Place to Live

Home Sweet Home: Read the Saturday Real Estate supplement, Sunday Real Estate section and classified ads to locate information about apartments, condominiums and houses. Select a D.C. residence for the “Walkability” comparison and a Virginia or Maryland suburban residence for the “Affordability” contrast. State the address. Explain your choice.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Walkability</th>
<th>Affordability</th>
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Transportation Options: Plan a round trip to and from work to determine cost.

- Walk
- Bicycle
- Taxi
- Use Metro
- BikeShare
- Other______________________________
- Use private vehicle
  Miles driven, cost of gas per gallon
- Parking fee
- Use public transportation
- Use BikeShare (limited areas)
- Other______________________________

Lifestyle Preference: What kinds of activities and environment do you prefer for your after-work hours and weekends? Does where you live influence your enjoyment of these preferences?

- Restaurant
- Sports events
- Performing arts
- Other amenities
- Proximity to friends
- Restaurant
- Sports events
- Performing arts
- Other amenities
- Proximity to friends
On Wheels with Warren Brown

Warren Brown has one of the best jobs among newspaper columnists. He has covered the cars industry for  *The Washington Post* since 1982. He has taken road tests, attended car shows, heard the spin and seen touted innovations. He knows automobiles, trucks and SUVs inside and out; large-, economy- and mid-size; gasoline, diesel and electric powered. He is candid in his evaluations and to-the-point in his Nuts & Bolts lists.

Read three On Wheels columns to get a sense of his style and approach. List the headlines and featured vehicles:

a.  
b.  
c.  

1. Describe the tone of Brown’s columns.

2. What kind of information does Brown include in the reviews?

3. How does Brown relate cars to different audiences/readers? Give a specific example.

*Select one of his columns to answer the following questions. Give the headline, vehicle reviewed and date of the review.*

4. How does Brown compare and contrast the featured vehicle to similar vehicles?

5. What are Brown’s sources of information beyond his personal experience? Give examples.

6. “Nuts & Bolts” is a sidebar with quick reference information. What does this information tell the reader about the featured vehicle?

7. Do you consider Warren Brown to be a reliable source for a vehicle review? Explain your response.
Myths about gas taxes

BY PAUL BLEDSOE
December 19, 2014

A dramatic 40 percent drop in oil prices since June has prompted new discussion about raising the long-static federal gasoline tax and has many states considering gas tax hikes as well. At the federal level, Congress hasn’t increased the tax in more than 20 years, leaving it at 18.4 cents a gallon since 1993 — when gas cost a mere $1 a gallon. Among states, gas taxes average about 23.5 cents a gallon. Should we be paying more? Misconceptions about the history and politics of gas taxes are clouding the debate.

1 The federal gas tax is intended to cut oil use and help the environment.

The potential environmental benefits of raising gas taxes have been cited by environmental advocates and economists alike. “If the tax on gasoline were higher, people would alter their behavior to drive less,” economist Greg Mankiw wrote. “They would be more likely to take public transportation, use car pools or live closer to work. The incentives they face when deciding how much to drive would more closely match the true social costs and benefits.”

But neither getting people to drive less nor reducing carbon emissions is a goal of the federal gas tax. Instead, Congress instituted the modern tax in the 1950s to help pay for construction of the interstate highway system; in essence it is a user tax on drivers. A majority of the revenue is still “dedicated” to this purpose, meaning it goes directly to the federal Highway Trust Fund, not the general treasury.

On the four occasions since the ’50s that Congress has increased the tax, it stipulated that the additional revenue go to either the Highway Fund or toward deficit reduction. (A small amount — less than 3 cents a gallon — is directed to fund mass transit.)

The claims that higher taxes would have a positive impact on the environment or oil security are also questionable. Even if the federal gas tax went up by, say, 10 cents, it would remain a relatively small portion of the overall price of gas
that would have far less influence on behavior than market-driven price fluctuations. And because studies show that more roads lead to more driving, oil consumption and exurban sprawl, any drop in consumption encouraged by higher taxes would be more than offset when new roads were built or old ones expanded.

Conservatives oppose raising the gas tax, and liberals support it.

Yes, conservatives are usually the ones to stand behind the pledge “no new taxes.” But since the 1950s, the federal gas tax has been raised under three Republican administrations (Eisenhower, Reagan and George H.W. Bush) and only one Democratic (Clinton). Although the red states of the South do tend to have slightly lower gas taxes than most other states, there isn’t a clear red-state-blue-state divide. Liberal-leaning New Jersey boasts one of the country’s lowest gas taxes, at less than 11 cents a gallon. And Republican governors and legislators — in Michigan, Utah, South Carolina, South Dakota and elsewhere — are among the most vocal advocates right now for raising gas taxes in their states.

Conservatives tend to be more ideologically disposed to “consumption taxes,” such as a gas tax, rather than taxes on income or capital. That helps explain why Mankiw — chairman of the president’s Council of Economic Advisers under George W. Bush and an adviser to Mitt Romney in 2012 — and moderate conservatives such as Washington Post columnist Robert Samuelson have long supported increasing the gas tax. Other conservatives such as Doug Holtz-Eakin, an adviser to both Presidents Bush and to John McCain, favor a carbon tax, with revenue used to cut other taxes and reduce pollution.

As for liberals, many see the gas tax as “regressive,” hitting lower-income people hardest, and favor raising it only if the increase is explicitly offset by other reductions for lower- and middle-income taxpayers. That’s the deal Democrats struck when the gas tax was last increased, in 1993. Progressives also tend to prefer a carbon tax, instead of a gas tax, to discourage greenhouse gas emissions; a carbon pricing bill by liberal Sen. Maria Cantwell (D-Wash.) and moderate Sen. Susan Collins (R-Maine) would recycle three-quarters of revenue directly back to consumers.

Raising gas taxes is political suicide.

“I think it’s too toxic and continues to be too toxic,” Steve LaTourette, a former Republican congressman and buddy of House Speaker John Boehner, told The Atlantic this month. “I see no political will to get this done.”

While this is accepted Washington wisdom, history doesn’t support the idea that voters will punish politicians for this tax increase. Dwight Eisenhower, Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton all raised the federal gas tax in their first terms; each was reelected. Ross Perot made a 50-cent-a-gallon gas tax hike the centerpiece of his 1992 presidential campaign and won the highest third-party vote total in the past 100 years.

At the state level, governors of both parties have raised gas taxes recently without a clear pattern of voters turning them out. In New Hampshire, Democratic Gov. Maggie Hassan signed a gas tax increase into law in May and was reelected handily in November, even in a Republican “wave election.” Wyoming almost doubled its gas tax in 2013, a move advocated by GOP Gov. Matt Mead, who won reelection this year by a wide margin. The latest drop in gas prices, along with pressing road repairs, may be changing the political dynamic even in red states. The president of the South Carolina Chamber of Commerce recently announced that his group would support the first state gas tax increase in more than 25 years.

Opinion polls consistently show that the American public supports a small increase — 10 cents — in the federal tax to improve road maintenance (67 percent in one survey) or even to fund projects to reduce global warming (50 percent), but very low support (20 percent) if no purpose is specified.
Low gas taxes mean Americans spend less on gas than people in other countries.

Advocates of higher gas taxes like to point out that the United States has the lowest gasoline taxes (combined federal and state) of any industrialized country. Europe’s gas taxes are often 20 times higher, China’s are three times higher, and even developing countries have taxes far higher than in the United States. So Americans must spend less on gas, right? Not necessarily.

With less than 5 percent of the global population, the United States consumes well over 20 percent of the world’s oil, largely because it has many more cars per capita (about one per person) and Americans drive longer distances more frequently. U.S. total vehicle miles traveled in 2013 were just below 3 trillion, or about 9,000 miles per person, far higher than in any other country. Europeans also drive cars that are on average at least 30 percent more fuel-efficient than the cars Americans drive, offsetting lower prices at the pump in the United States.

Raising gas taxes now means consumers will be doubly penalized when gas prices go up again.

Actually, consumer spending on gas is likely to fall further in the future, because fuel-efficiency regulations will roughly double the mileage of new cars over the next decade. Americans buying the same model car 10 years from now will get much higher gas mileage, and so pay less each year for gas, even if taxes were raised significantly. This coming revolution in mileage is another reason politicians see opportunities to raise gas taxes. A few years ago, a bipartisan group of former senators proposed broad-based tax reform largely financed by a gradual $1 increase in the gas tax. Their reasoning was simple: Consumers would not feel the difference. “Instituted along with a federally mandated increase in CAFE (corporate average fuel economy) standards,” they said, “any increase in the cost of gasoline at the pump could be offset by better fuel efficiency.”

Paul Bledsoe is a senior fellow on energy and society at the German Marshall Fund and president of Bledsoe & Associates, a policy consultancy. He was a staff member at the Senate Finance Committee and the Clinton White House.