

■ GUEST COMMENTARY

Are state lawmakers asleep at the transportation wheel?

The editorial, "Congressional Leadership Lacking in Addressing Our Real Transportation Needs," (AC-T, Nov. 26), makes some good points about the challenges facing our nation's transportation system. We need not look all the way to Washington, D.C., however, for the source of many of the problems that we encounter daily. They hit much closer to home.

Unmet transportation needs aren't going away, but some of our state's policymakers and elected leaders seem content to close their eyes and hope that they will disappear. The North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) estimates that present revenue sources will fall short of needs by more than \$30 billion during the course of the next 25 years. In other words, we need to raise an additional \$1.2 billion a year in transportation revenue just to meet currently identified needs — to say nothing of needs that will arise due to population growth in coming decades.

As North Carolina's only broadbased,



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statewide transportation coalition, NC Go! has come to understand just how intertwined transportation is with the daily lives of all North Carolinians. Jobs, education, public services and commerce are all fundamentally dependent on the ability of people and goods to get from one place to another. That ability is increasingly threatened in our state. Judging from their lack of action, policymakers seem to see nothing but a smooth ride ahead. In some cases, the prevailing attitude among lawmakers on transportation matters goes beyond neglect. Take, for instance, their raids on the state Highway Trust Fund. For 17 years, the General Assembly has diverted more than \$3.7 billion from this transportation

revenue to non-transportation purposes. Once again this year, the North Carolina state budget was passed with hundreds of millions of dollars diverted from the Highway Trust Fund.

What is the real cost of failing to meet transportation needs? More time spent in traffic and more dollars of gas burned during the daily commute? Yes, but there are also consequences that are far more significant and alarming. Dependable roads, rail and public transit don't just get us to work, they are a primary reason that quality jobs are here in the first place. When businesses and industries consider where to locate a new facility, adequate transportation plays a key role in their decision. The location of Dell's new manufacturing center in Winston-Salem was transportation infrastructure. If transportation infrastructure continues to deteriorate, so will our access to the quality jobs of the future. The problems don't stop there.

Tourism is big business in Western North Carolina, and that too is threat-

ened by traffic congestion. Interstate 40 and Interstate 26 should provide convenient access to the scenic Blue Ridge Mountains for tourists far and wide, but maintenance problems and the summer rush often overwhelm current road capacity. The junction of these two interstate highways is now ranked among the worst summer month bottlenecks in the country. NC Go! continues to advocate solutions to our state's growing transportation crisis. First and foremost, diversions from the state Highway Trust Fund must be ended immediately — or at the very least, phased out. Continued use of the Trust Fund as a piggy bank for non-transportation purposes will continue to have a direct, negative effect on transportation.

Another key point is the state gas tax. NC Go! adamantly opposes any freeze or reduction. The facts show that doing so would be reckless and fiscally unsound, as the state gas tax is the primary source of revenue for existing highway maintenance and public transportation across

the state. Reducing that revenue would set us back years and result only in a greater backlog of unmet needs. We feel other options should be considered, including: support for local option financing; investment in safety and capacity improvements for rural roads; expansion of the list of candidate toll roads to include existing roads, like Interstate 95, that need upgrades; and a continued effort to improve management and project delivery practices at NCDOT. These are serious challenges, but there is still time to get transportation in North Carolina back on track.

Some of these decisions won't be easy, but this much is sure: failure to bite the bullet and accomplish real transportation funding reform now will result in a crisis from which North Carolina may never fully recover.

NC Go! is the only diverse statewide organization fighting to relieve traffic congestion and to increase transportation funding. For more information, please visit www.ncgo.org.