Mr. Spock goes to Washington

By Deborah Lockridge • Editor in Chief

If Mr. Spock, the oh-so-logical Vulcan of “Star Trek” fame, were to find himself on Capitol Hill right now, his head would explode.

The new session of Congress is facing a federal highway program that runs out of money in May. The Highway Trust Fund has been insolvent since 2008, limping along on transfers from the Treasury while Congress keeps kicking the can down the road. It did it again last summer, when it passed a 10-month highway bill, the one that expires in just a few months.

Meanwhile, a worldwide glut of crude oil has pushed gas and diesel prices to their lowest prices in years, and the economy continues to improve.

Quite logically, some in Congress have proposed raising the fuel tax to help eliminate the massive shortfalls in the Trust Fund.

First passed in 1956 to pay for the more than 40,000 miles of road in the Interstate Highway System, the gas tax has been stuck at 18.4 cents a gallon since 1993 — the longest it’s ever gone without an increase.

Meanwhile, the cost of roadbuilding has gone up, while more fuel-efficient vehicles mean less revenue.

Right now, to channel Spock, is a logical time to raise the fuel tax.

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Instead of doing the logical thing and raising the fuel tax — and indexing it to inflation so we don’t just end up in this same spot a decade or two from now — politicians have come up with just about every cockamamie scheme you can imagine. Soak the rich. Get corporations to quit parking their profits overseas. Turn highways over to private companies and create more toll roads. Get the federal government out of road-building altogether and let the states worry about it.

Some politicians, such as Sens. John Thune, Orrin Hatch and Jim Inhofe, have left the door open — or perhaps cracked is a better description. They carefully call it a “user fee” to deal with the people who hear the word “tax” and automatically stick their fingers in their ears and start shouting “la la la la la” like a 5-year-old.

Even more logical would be a vehicle-miles traveled tax — excuse me, user fee — to address issues such as the fact that more fuel efficient vehicles aren’t paying their fair share. But if we can’t get a bipartisan support to simply increase an existing and well-understood tax, forget trying to get Congress to agree on a more complex VMT system that would rely on technology and raise privacy concerns.

In the meantime, no matter what you call it, the seemingly logical solution of raising the per-gallon user fee, aka fuel tax, remains a tough sell on Capitol Hill, despite the current low fuel prices.

There are many roadblocks to what should be a no-brainer, including opposition from swing-state GOP senators up for reelection in 2016, and a well-financed offensive from groups backed by the conservative Koch brothers’ political muscle.

Then there’s the skepticism, to put it mildly, of GOP leaders in both chambers.

Even most Democrats are lukewarm on the idea at best. President Obama has opposed raising fuel taxes in the past, citing the negative impact on consumers in tough economic times. That might have been understandable during the biggest economic downturn the country had seen since the Great Depression. But with the economy unquestionably on the rebound and fuel prices at the lowest seen in years, that negative impact would be far less today.

Yet the White House has refused to endorse calls to bring fuel taxes in line with today’s costs for road and bridge construction and upkeep, sticking with its original plan to finance new infrastructure spending with revenue supposedly gained by closing tax loopholes that favor the wealthy.

It may have made sense during the recession to avoid putting extra financial stress on struggling citizens, but the situation has changed. Refusing to acknowledge that and support a simple user-fee option is, as Spock would say, “highly illogical.” ■
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