Methods and Messages:
An analysis of messaging strategies for transportation funding

Final Report
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Authors
Jason Wagner
Ben Ettelman
Tina Geiselbrecht
Maarit Moran
Chris Simek
Debbie Spillane
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Abstract

Many state and local governments are struggling to adequately fund transportation systems. To address this, several governments recently attempted to increase their transportation funding. With this often difficult political proposition, success can depend on the effectiveness of a public outreach campaign. TTI researchers reviewed the literature on public outreach campaigns for increasing transportation funding and surveyed six recent attempts by state and local governments to increase funding. The research team synthesized the information into case studies and lessons learned. Selected lessons include focusing messages on the economic benefits of transportation, highlighting the value in investing sooner rather than later, and linking funding increases to specific projects.
Executive Summary

Many state and local governments across the country are feeling the pressures from an underfunded transportation system. Congestion costs are growing, infrastructure quality is degrading, and the motor fuel taxes funding these needs have diminished due to inflation and improving fuel economy. As a result, state and local governments are looking to increase transportation funding from traditional and innovative sources.

Whatever the policy mechanism, increasing revenues is often a difficult political proposition. Nonetheless, several state and local governments recently attempted to increase their transportation funding. To accomplish this task, a common strategy was to educate the public and inform lawmakers through outreach and communication campaigns.

These communications campaigns, while varied in their organization and execution, relied most frequently on a few key messages to relay the need and urgency of increasing transportation funding.

- Investments in transportation will improve the economy.
- The costs of taking action now are less than continued inaction.
- Funds will be spent on specific projects.

These messages helped to frame transportation funding as something that is vital, beneficial, and reliable. Americans consistently rank the economy as one of the most important issues facing the United States, and messages frequently tied transportation funding to economic growth and development. Similarly, the investment message emphasized that increasing funding now is not only the right thing to do, it is a smart investment in our shared future. Finally, the last message conveyed multiple messages: transportation funding will be spent on projects that benefit you, and the government is transparent and can be trusted to spend your money responsibly.

Other important policy and messaging lessons learned include:

- Keep messages simple, concise, and consistent.
- Implement tax increases incrementally.
- Involve stakeholders early and often.
- An independent technical committee can serve as a strong messenger.
**Introduction**

The United States is growing, both economically and in population. This is normally a positive thing for a country. Growth implies exciting opportunities, new jobs, greater prosperity, and a brighter future.

Growth also causes strain. As our country grows, the demands on our transportation infrastructure continue to rapidly increase. More goods must move from ports to rails, rails to trucks, and from trucks to shelves. More employees must commute from their homes to their jobs. More children have to be driven to school, and more parents take trips to grocery stores.

Unfortunately, and for a variety of reasons, funding for transportation has not kept up with these growing needs. Since the 1950s, real spending on highways per mile traveled fell by nearly 50 percent. Inflation has steadily eroded the federal gas tax, which lost more than 33 percent of its value since 1993—the last time Congress increased the fuel tax.

Simultaneously, increasing transportation demands have caused more traffic congestion and crumbling roads. The number of miles vehicles traveled (referred to as VMT) from 1980 to 2006 increased 97 percent for personal vehicles and 106 percent for trucks. Funds to construct and maintain roads have not kept up, resulting in twice the traffic driving on essentially the same amount of roadway. In fact, more than half of miles motorists traveled on the federal-funded highway system occurred on roads that were in less than good condition, and more than a quarter of the nation’s bridges were classified as structurally deficient or functionally obsolete. Congestion alone cost the country $121 billion in 2011.

Despite challenges, a handful of states have started to address the funding shortfall by increasing transportation revenues. This report seeks to detail what messages, methods, and tools were used in states’ successful actions in increasing their transportation funding. It investigates six cases where states were able to increase their transportation funding and one case where a major metropolitan government was unsuccessful. Finally, this report summarizes the messaging best practices.

As a note, there are many ways states can address transportation funding shortfalls. Several of the states reviewed here chose to increase their fuel taxes and other traditional transportation revenue sources, some restructured their fuel taxes, and one chose to eliminate their fuel tax in favor of increasing their sales taxes. The purpose of this report is to analyze the messaging strategies used to increase transportation funding. It is not to assess the efficacy of any particular policy approach. While the focus of this report is on messaging used when increasing transportation funding, this does not imply that raising taxes is the only, or even optimum, policy approach.
Literature Review

Funding challenges plague many transportation organizations, so they need the best ways to communicate transportation funding priorities and needs to the public. The following section describes findings from a few recent studies looking at the principles guiding public messaging campaigns for increased transportation funding.

Messaging Guidelines

The first study, conducted by the National Cooperative Highway Research Program (NCHRP), provides five guidelines for best conveying messages to the public about funding increases.6 Messages should be:

1. Clear and consistent regardless of the medium.
2. Simple enough to understand.
3. Powerful enough to cause a reaction.
4. Consistently relaying the same core message.
5. Substantiated and defensible, even if the data are not disseminated.

First, messages should be clear and consistent, regardless of the medium (pp. 2-1).3 It does not matter what tools are used or how robust an organization’s social media presence is. Muddy or incoherent messages do not resonate with audiences.

Second, messages should be simple enough for audiences to understand. If a message is not easily understood, the communicator risks losing the audience. Third, messages should be powerful enough to cause a reaction. The goal is to get the public engaged and active.

Fourth, the audience “should hear the same core message, no matter what tool or person is communicating it” (pp. 2-1).3 Multiple messages from many different sources will create a cacophony of different messages, which will lessen the overall impact. Finally, messages should be substantiated and defensible, even if the supporting data is not disseminated.

Message Themes

The NCHRP research found that state and local governments consistently relied on five messaging themes when discussing increases in transportation funding. First, “Investment in transportation will save time and money, improve safety, and decrease congestion.”3 Salt Lake City conveyed this message with the tagline, “Save time, money, and headaches.”

A second theme, “Investment in transportation will support economic development” was also popular among state and local governments.3 The slow economy seen in recent years makes this messaging strategy particularly effective, as the public consistently believes the economy is the largest problem facing America.7 Presenting transportation investments as a means to improve the economy resonated with voters. Minnesota’s tagline for their campaign, “Our future is riding on it” is a good example of a concise message that is clear, simple, and powerful.
The third theme, “The transportation agency spends its funds efficiently” seeks to shore up public trust. This message ensures voters that if they choose to invest in transportation, their money and trust are not misplaced (pp. 2-3). Several state and local governments used public relations campaigns highlighting recent efforts to improve accountability, transparency, and project delivery.

The fourth theme, “the transportation system has deteriorated, and current funding will not meet the needs” combines two strategies to construct a compelling message (pp. 2-3). It uses both emotional and informational arguments, by subtly raising the threat of collapsing bridges and crumbling infrastructure, while supporting these claims with evidence describing the extent of the problem. Transportation agencies and advocacy groups often create visuals and graphics conveying how problems have worsened over time, and how they will further deteriorate if left unaddressed (Figure 1).

The final theme ties increased funding to specific projects. This theme lessens voters’ concern that funds will be wasted or not be spent effectively. Instead, it tells voters exactly how their money will be spent, so they know it will be used appropriately.

Methods and Tools

When organizations try to convey their messages to an audience, they use both methods and tools.

Methods

Methods can be thought of as the basic steps in public communication. These steps include outreach, education, and marketing. Outreach establishes initial contact with constituents and stakeholders, and seeks to gain feedback about the initiative. Outreach campaigns “provide awareness and information” to stakeholders and constituents, allowing them to determine their level of interest, position, and any actions they might take on an issue (pp. 2-6).

Education “involves transferring information to constituencies” with sufficient context to “provide them a more complete understanding of the issues” (pp. 2-6). Education gives stakeholders the tools to not only become better informed, but also girds them with the knowledge to inform others. Importantly, education is not about persuasion, but merely providing information.

Marketing is more targeted than education and not only seeks to inform constituents, but also persuade them to take a particular action or subscribe to a certain viewpoint. While some state
and local governmental agencies are prohibited from certain types of marketing and lobbying, often advocates for good roads and transportation infrastructure will take up the gauntlet when governmental support is unavailable.

**Tools**

Tools are used when an entity engages in outreach, education, and marketing.6 Tools are ways entities can convey their messages to the public. There are 12 commonly used tools.

- Polls and surveys.
- Focus groups.
- Reports.
- Presentations.
- Logos.
- Websites.
- Radio.
- Television advertisements.
- Print advertisements.
- Roadside signs.
- Editorial boards.
- Social media.

These tools were helpful in conveying messages to the public. Some were more frequently used in specific methods. Polling, focus groups, presentations, and handouts were used in outreach (pp. 2-6). Websites, informational reports, presentations, and media utilization were used in education (pp. 2-7). Radio, television, and print advertisements were commonly used during the marketing phase (pp. 2-8). For additional examples and a more thorough explanation, please see NCHRP report 20-24 (62).6

**Undermining Success**

The research reviewed also found that some activities could undermine success.6 The first example is a premature announcement. If an organization has not done the requisite footwork of identifying a need, clearly defining their message theme, deciding which tools to use, and coordinating their strategies, they may end up with disorganized and ineffective communication.

Another factor that undermines success is inconsistent messaging (pp. 1-21).6 When individuals present many different messages, it dilutes communication and can result in conflicting information. A proposed New York City congestion pricing initiative provides an example from the literature. Initially, the city stated that their sole motivation for the policy was managing congestion. Later, it came out that the proponents were most interested in the revenue associated with the measure. The public reacted negatively to the revelation, and the city’s reputation was tarnished, appearing both dishonest and lacking in transparency. The city could have avoided the blowback by initially stating that the policy provided multiple benefits: it would raise revenue while simultaneously decreasing congestion.
Another way that organizations undermine their success is by relying solely (or too heavily) on technical arguments (pp. 1-22). Conveying the technical reasons behind the need for additional funding is a necessity when communicating. It should not necessarily be the sole or dominant factor, however. Transportation agencies must be aware of their audience—often politicians or the broader public—and tailor their message appropriately.

A final barrier to success is a lack of positive coordination with stakeholders. Transportation agencies must ensure they coordinate their message and have support of all the necessary stakeholders. They must know who is in favor and who is in opposition. Failing to do so can result in unanticipated and unpleasant surprises that could derail attempts to increase funding. The example given in the literature is the case of the Trans Texas Corridor, for which failure can partially be attributed to the fact that many key stakeholders were incorrectly presumed allies. In actuality, these stakeholders became strongly opposed to the proposition and spearheaded the effort to prevent it.

**Advice from State Transportation Officials**

A recent report from the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO) provided several recommendations for communicating transportation funding issues. The report derived its recommendations from a peer exchange of information from AASHTO members, where communications specialists from around the country discussed the methods and practices that were vital to successful communication.

The resulting AASHTO report identifies four building blocks of effective communication. These include the following (pp. 6):

- **Audience Identification** – identifying the audience and their motivations will enable development of messages that empower supporters, convince uncertain individuals, and minimize the impact of opponents.

- **Market Research** – learn about the audience, what they care about, and what messages will best convince them.

- **Message Design** – several principles define the best ways to design a message, including keeping it simple, staying positive, using metaphors, making it personal, and offering a call to action.

- **Message Delivery** – inconsistent delivery will derail even the best messages. Continually and consistently repeat the message so it will not get lost.
Transportation Funding Messaging Case Studies

Connecticut

Circumstances

Connecticut’s current fuel taxes are among the nation’s highest, with the combined federal and state taxes of 49 cents per gallon, placing it fourth behind Hawaii, California, and New York. The state does not collect tolls on its roadways and relies heavily on gas tax revenue. In 2005, the Connecticut Legislature acted in response to gradually mounting pressure from a broad-based coalition of industry, government and private citizen advocates and passed a combined fuel tax increase that incrementally grew the state’s fuel taxes over eight years from 44 cents in 2005 to today’s combined tax of 49 cents per gallon.9

The Connecticut gas tax is a combination of two distinct taxes:

- A motor fuels excise tax of 25 cents per gallon.
- A gross receipts tax on petroleum products of 8.1 percent, which adds an additional 24.3 cents per gallon to the price of fuel.10

Connecticut Gov. Jodi Rell introduced a major initiative in 2005 that would increase the motor fuels excise tax component of the fuel tax. The Senate rejected this proposition in favor of a gradual increase to the gross receipts tax on petroleum products. When it passed with nearly unanimous support from the Connecticut Legislature, Public Act 05-4 provided funding for a $1.3 billion transportation-spending package by increasing the gross receipts tax according to the following schedule.11

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Gross Receipts Tax</th>
<th>Effective Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5.0%</td>
<td>Prior to 7/1/2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.8%</td>
<td>7/1/2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3%</td>
<td>7/1/2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.0%</td>
<td>7/1/2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.5%</td>
<td>7/1/2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.1%</td>
<td>7/1/2013</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Connecticut was able to build consensus on the need for increased funding for transportation investments through the coordinated participation of key stakeholders, including law makers, governmental panels, and citizen and business groups.
Stakeholders
The fuel tax increase in 2005 passed with little controversy and merited limited organized public messaging due to several factors. First, strategic efforts began years earlier to garner support for increased transportation funding leading up to the 2005 bill. A series of reports and public events from private-sector and governmental coalitions repeatedly argued the state must raise additional transportation revenue to support economic growth. The legislature formed the Transportation Strategy Board in 2001, which included representatives from the private sector, state agencies, and local transportation zones within the state (referred to as Transportation Investment Areas). The Board produced technical reports that substantiated the need for state transportation investment.12 This strong and consistent message led to gradual agreement among key stakeholders that the state needed to increase the fuel tax.

Second, the limited public messaging could be partially attributable to Connecticut’s traditionally liberal political culture.13 Constituents and political leaders in a liberal culture are often more receptive to the idea of increasing taxes to meet the state’s needs.

These combined factors contributed to the minimal amount of organized public outreach. Nonetheless, advocates, and opponents in Connecticut did employ various themes and messaging strategies that are discussed in the following sections.

Messaging Strategies

Advocates
The Transportation Strategy Board was the backbone of support for the transportation bill. The Board united business, government, and citizen advocates in a collaborative effort to recommend a comprehensive transportation strategy and a long-term financing plan for the state.14 By engaging key stakeholders from across the state in the Board’s activities, a message was sent that the needs of diverse stakeholders were being considered. Identifying stakeholders during this early stage of the process may have preempted a contentious publicity battle or other unanticipated opposition. The Board’s reports also provided a technical basis to defend the need for increased transportation funding.

One stakeholder group, the Transportation Investment Coalition—a combination of city officials, business community members, and environmental advocates—argued Connecticut needed a long-term plan that included both funding sources and strategies. Some coalition members supported a direct gas tax increase, while others argued that the gas tax could drive consumers to buy gas in neighboring states.15 Another stakeholder group, the Connecticut Rail Commuter Council, was a lawmaker-appointed citizen’s advocacy group for rail riders. This council favored major investments in the state’s transportation network and a gas tax increase that would support both mass transit and road improvements.16 A final group, the Connecticut Conference of Municipalities Transportation Task Force advocated for transportation spending at the state level on behalf of its member cities and towns. They supported multimodal transportation solutions,
including the recommendations of the Transportation Strategy Board, to address congestion and other traffic problems that affect small towns as well as Connecticut’s major urban areas.\textsuperscript{17}

The clear and consistent theme evoked in support of increasing state funding was that transportation spending was critical to economic growth in the state. Stakeholders invoked this theme in support of the transportation bill in forums, reports, and public statements. The Transportation Strategy Board’s strategic planning process that led up to the funding bill was sparked by an independent economic study, informally called the \textit{Gallis Report}, that emphasized the need for increased transportation funding and investments in the state.\textsuperscript{18}

The Board’s 2003 report proved to be an effective tool in defending and reinforcing the suggested tax increase. It provided a clear, technical defense of the spending increase that could be accessed easily by the public.\textsuperscript{14} Figure 2 highlights the subtle yet notable decision to borrow the cover page of the \textit{Gallis Report} for the Board’s 2003 report, hinting at the connection to economic development and conveying a consistent message. Similarly, all of the Board’s report titles relay a sense of urgency and movement towards greater economic development:

- Map to a Vibrant Economy (2011).

Additional themes were incorporated into messaging strategies that bolstered the overarching theme of economic development. The tax increase of 2005 dovetailed with a requirement to undertake $1.3 billion of specific transportation projects as outlined in the same transportation bill. Specific initiatives proposed for both highways and railroads were touted heavily in media statements and press releases, overshadowing the issue of funding sources.\textsuperscript{19} In fact, the funding source was so inconsequential that it often was not mentioned in press releases.

Legislators and advocates also introduced the peril of crumbling infrastructure as a theme in press releases and public statements. A tragic bridge collapse over Connecticut’s Mianus River in 1983 sparked the creation of the state’s Special Transportation Fund and a major transportation spending initiative.\textsuperscript{20} A reference to this shared history combined emotional and informational arguments in an effort to build support for the current funding increase.\textsuperscript{21}
Representatives of the Gasoline and Automotive Service Dealers of America voiced opposition to a gas tax increase. Michael Fox, head of the organization, argued that the switch from a direct fuel tax to the wholesale tax was a “budget gimmick” that merely obscured the fact that the taxes would be paid by Connecticut consumers in either case. Still, statements at public meetings and quotes in local news coverage marked the extent of the public opposition to the tax. Another Gasoline and Automotive Service Dealers of America representative commented to the press that if there was to be a tax increase, the shifting of “transportation tax dollars to non-transportation expenses” should be prohibited, reflecting minimal resistance even from opposition groups.

Although the bill received wide support at the time of approval in 2005, the tax increases have continued to garner attention in the policy arena. Groups like the Connecticut Senate Republicans created a statewide petition calling upon the Governor to call a special legislative session to prevent the scheduled tax increase from going into effect in 2013, arguing that this “hidden” tax is an excessive burden on consumers. In an effort to rally public opposition against the tax, the group collected over 17,000 signatures in an online petition titled “Ax the Gas Tax,” but the final 0.5 percent increase apportioned by the 2005 transportation bill was introduced as scheduled on July 1, 2013.

Lessons Learned

The Connecticut House and Senate almost unanimously approved the 2005 transportation bill, and the governor was an enthusiastic supporter. Against the backdrop of a train station in South Norwalk, Conn., Gov. Rell signed what she deemed “the most ambitious transportation improvement program” in 20 years. The experience in Connecticut demonstrated the successful use of clear and concise themes and the strength of a unified messaging strategy.

Economic development was the dominant theme used to support the gas tax increase in Connecticut. This theme provided a unified vision that found support among a wide range of politicians, business representatives and citizen’s advocacy groups. Agreement on the need to support economic growth overshadowed the differences that may have existed about specific transportation investments or funding sources.

The Transportation Strategy Board was a key element of the strategy that laid the groundwork for the tax increase that was eventually passed. The Board was both a feature of the message and a central tool in shaping the message content. The activities of the Board contributed to the lack of controversy surrounding the tax increase in two important ways. The technical reports reinforced the link between transportation investment and economic growth and brought credibility and substance to the bill’s content. Second, the Board engaged stakeholders early and often, ensuring that any contentious issues were addressed long before the funding bill was put to a vote in the legislature. This suggests a comprehensive strategy that could be adapted in other states.
Maryland

Circumstances

In 2013, Maryland took action to address a serious transportation funding issue. Maryland last raised its gas tax in 1992, and the state’s subsequent inability to raise its 23.5 cent per gallon tax meant that revenues had not kept pace with inflation or construction costs. The gas tax in Maryland was 20 percent lower than the national average. The funding shortfall became so serious that the Maryland Department of Transportation (MDOT) decided that, by 2018, the capital investment program would focus solely on system preservation.

To address these issues, Maryland Governor O’Malley and legislative leaders pursued an effort to raise new revenue for Maryland’s Transportation Trust Fund (TTF). The enacted version of HB 1515, which became law in July 2013, would raise $4.4 billion over six years by:

- Indexing the gas tax to inflation, starting immediately (with a ceiling of no more than 8 percent in any given year).
- Adding a 3 percent sales tax at the pump, phased in over a period of three years starting summer 2013.
- Requiring indexing Maryland Transit Authority (MTA) transit fares to inflation through the consumer price index.
- Increasing the sales tax on gasoline to four percent if the congressional ban on internet sales tax is lifted, otherwise, the tax goes up five percent if Congress does not lift the ban.

Stakeholders

The advocacy groups were comprised of two main organizations that were also coalitions of numerous public and private organizations and businesses. The Get Maryland Moving group and Central Maryland Transportation (CMT) Alliance created individual websites with various social media platforms to get their message out to the public.

Some of the opponent groups like Americans for Prosperity – Maryland, consisted of sub-groups within recognized national political groups, such as Americans for Prosperity (AFP). According to the AFP website, it “…is an organization of grassroots leaders who engage citizens in the name of limited government and free markets on the local, state, and federal levels”. AFP-Maryland has a separate website from the national organization and included articles and social media platforms to address the gas tax increase.

Messaging Strategies

Largely, advocates of the gas tax increase claimed increased funding for transportation would bring jobs, reduce road congestion, ease workers’ commutes, improve the state’s quality of life,
and encourage people to do business in Maryland, but opponents of the plan contested all of those arguments, and warned that a large gas tax increase could damage the state’s economy.

**Advocates**

A variety of advocacy groups used multiple messaging strategies to inform the electorate of the implications of raising the gas tax. One advocacy group, *Get Maryland Moving*, is a unified coalition of environmental, business, and civic activists that supported Governor O’Malley’s plan to raise the gas tax and fund transportation infrastructure. Kelly Blynn of the Coalition for Smarter Growth (a member organization) described the efforts of the group, saying that “in just a few weeks, the new coalition united nearly 40 organizations from Baltimore to Washington and beyond, generated over 1,000 petition signatures and 500 direct emails to legislators, and coverage in the Washington Post, Examiner, and Gazette.”

Figure 3 displays the *Get Maryland Moving* logo. The logo acts as a messaging tool as part of an organized outreach effort to support transportation investment in Maryland. The map of Maryland and wheels in motion convey ‘moving forward’ with urgency and action.

Let’s act now for a sustainable transportation future. Join us in supporting the Transportation Infrastructure Investment Act of 2013 to Get Maryland Moving!

www.getmarylandmoving.org

Figure 3: Get Maryland Moving Logo

A message and graphic also used by *GetMarylandMoving.org* included the following quote about the tax.
Q: Why did the Marylander cross the road?
A: To get to the lower gas prices.

The following photos were all taken in Maryland on Saturday, March 9, 2013, in some cases right across the street from each other:

The truth is, local gas prices fluctuate wildly, often between stations on the same street corner. Numerous factors cause these fluctuations, from OPEC output, to speculation, to seasonal price differences.

To pay less in gas, consider crossing the road. Paying two more cents per gallon won’t hurt Maryland. Maintaining the status quo of heavy traffic, rising air pollution, and some of the longest commute times in the nation will.

Figure 4: Get Maryland Moving Graphic
A popular argument against the tax has been the supposed increase that residents will see at the pump—13–20 cents per gallon as reported by state analysts and trumpeted loudly above the fold by the Washington Post and other outlets. But gas prices fluctuate wildly even within submarkets—many places may see gas prices go up by 20 cents a gallon in just a few weeks at certain times of year.

This quote reflects an argument the advocates used, that consumers would hardly notice a fuel tax increase, as retail gas prices fluctuate wildly by location and over time. In a related effort, the Get Maryland Moving coalition visited several Maryland gas stations on one particular day to show the variety in prices, sometimes at locations within sight of one another, and produced the graphic seen in Figure 4.

Messaging strategies included outreach to constituents and stakeholders, and informing the public about gridlock and proposed transportation projects to help alleviate it in the future. Their website included social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, and LinkedIn.

Another group, the Central Maryland Transportation (CMT) Alliance was a diverse coalition of corporate and civic leaders uniting business, philanthropic and institutional sectors, united around a common agenda: improving and expanding transportation options for the citizens and businesses of Central Maryland. The Alliance includes over 100 sponsors and partners from the community, both public and private entities. According to their website, The Transportation Alliance's key initiatives further the organization's mission to improve and expand Central Maryland's transportation options.32

The CMT website uses Facebook, Twitter, and newsletters for constituent outreach. They joined GetMovingMaryland.org to support the (enacted) bill, reflecting an increase in the gas tax, and keeping supporters engaged by discussing transportation priorities.

**Opponents**

**Americans for Prosperity Maryland,** the Hanover, MD based affiliate of a national group, started an online petition opposing an increase in Maryland’s tax. Nick Loffer, grass-roots director for AFP-Maryland, said the gas tax would be his organization’s main issue. Loffer argued that businesses opposed the fuel tax increase, and the Maryland government could not be trusted to use the funds honestly or efficiently.33

On the Americans for Prosperity website, Maryland organizers asked supporters to pressure elected officials to oppose the “damaging middle class tax hike.”34 The site asked supporters to bring their personal stories of how the gas tax would negatively affect them.34 AFP-Maryland supporters also protested along Route 40 in Catonsville holding signs and urging interested citizens to sign a petition against the proposed six percent sales tax on gas.34 The AFP-Maryland website included social media platforms Facebook and Twitter to engage and increase their number of supporters.
Larry Hogan, a real estate broker and former Maryland Cabinet Secretary served as Chairman of the opposition group, *Change Maryland*. Hogan felt that the Maryland government would not spend the revenues from the gas tax increase wisely, stating,

> There has been no comprehensive transportation strategy from the O’Malley administration. Over a billion dollars has been diverted from the Transportation Trust Fund, and the vast majority of the billions of dollars that have been spent on transportation have been wasted on expenses that are completely unrelated to fixing our road problems. Now he wants struggling Maryland families to pay for his mistakes and his lack of leadership.\(^{35}\)

Through Facebook, Twitter, and their website, *Change Maryland* sought to educate and engage citizens about the Governor’s proposed gas tax increase, and other economic issues affecting the state. Hogan founded his described “…non-partisan, grassroots organization…” to “…organize, inform and energize average Marylanders to fight back and to bring some much needed fiscal restraint and common sense to Annapolis.”\(^{36}\)

A final group, the *Maryland Public Policy Institute* (MPPI), is a nonpartisan public policy research and education organization that focuses on state policy issues. This group opposed the gas tax increase, stating on their site:

- The increase will not necessarily fund roads, bridges, or highways; O’Malley earmarked $660 million of the first $1.2 billion in revenue for controversial transit projects that tax payers do not use.

- It may not fund transportation at all. Politicians could soon divert the gas tax revenue away from transportation projects to pay for unsustainable government programs elsewhere.

- It will be among the nation’s highest; far higher than neighboring Virginia, Delaware and West Virginia, meaning cost-conscious Marylanders in border counties can easily take their business and their money across state lines.

- Lawmakers ignored better alternatives…MPPI provided lawmakers a thorough study of Maryland’s transportation system and concluded that a 21st century transportation network can be achieved without raising the gas tax.\(^{37}\)

Each of these groups used the messaging methods of outreach, education, and marketing. They sought new constituents and stakeholders though social media campaigns and awareness. By asking for personal stories relating to the impact increased fuel tax would have on them, AFP-Maryland sought to humanize an economic decision. The education message appeared to be less pronounced on these websites, while the persuasion and marketing efforts were broad and clear: Maryland citizens pay enough taxes already, and additional increases will harm businesses and families.
Lessons Learned

The first transportation funding proposal the Governor offered in 2012 failed, yet one year later Maryland reversed course, and lawmakers adopted the first gas-tax increase in response to a coordinated push by Gov. Martin O’Malley and leaders of the General Assembly. In 2012, even though Governor O’Malley’s party held a majority in both houses of Maryland’s legislature, his plan never made it out of committee in either chamber. According to Josh Tulkin, state director of the Maryland Sierra Club, “The proposal died for two reasons—lack of time, and lack of deep support. With most budget items pushed to the last days of the general assembly, only proposals with the strongest support are pushed forward.” Much of that support was directed to O’Malley’s proposal to raise taxes on those earning over $100,000, which ultimately failed.

In 2013, many small groups pushed for the tax increase. These groups united their efforts under the banner of larger coalitions and pushed a unified and coordinated message. This coordination is consistent with the findings from the literature review, that a unified messaging front provides a more cohesive and clear message. Clearer messages are easier for the public to understand and will create a better response.

Opponents were either independently opposed, or within a group that tackled various issues. Ultimately, the Governor and legislative leaders led the public campaign for passing the Transportation Infrastructure Investment Act in 2013.

Virginia

Circumstances

As of January 1, 2013, Virginia’s state gas tax was 17.5 cents per gallon. According to the American Petroleum Institute, Virginian motorists also paid an additional 2.4 cents in fees at the pump (as of January 1, 2013), bringing the total to 19.9 cents per gallon, ranking Virginia as paying the 10th lowest gas tax in the United States (of all 50 states, not including Washington, D.C.).

In January 2013, Virginia Governor Robert McDonnell introduced HB 2313, a transportation funding package named “Virginia’s Road to the Future.” He stated in a Washington Post editorial that the $0.175 per gallon gas tax would not generate the $500 million per year that was needed to eliminate the borrowing of new money to fund maintenance projects. Governor McDowell laid out his plan for solving Virginia’s transportation funding shortfalls through the following funding mechanisms:

- Eliminate the 17.5 cents per gallon gas tax at the pump within the entire State of Virginia.
- Retain the 17.5 cents per gallon tax on diesel fuel.
- Increase the Virginia sales tax by 0.8 percent and dedicate this newly generated revenue to transportation projects.
- Increase Virginia's existing sales tax commitment to transportation from 0.5 percent to 0.75 percent through 2018.\textsuperscript{41}

- Increase motor vehicle registration fees by $1 and charge alternative fuel vehicles an additional $100 fee.\textsuperscript{41}

The final version of HB 2313 was passed into Virginia state law on May 13, 2013.\textsuperscript{42} The enacted version of HB 2313 included the following funding mechanisms:

- Replaced the 17.5 cents per gallon gas tax rate with a 3.5 percent rate on the average wholesale price per gallon of gasoline.\textsuperscript{43}

- The percentage tax amounted to 11.1 cents per gallon as of July 1, 2013, the first day the tax rate change went into effect, based on the statewide average price for gasoline on February 20, 2013, which was $3.17.\textsuperscript{44}

- Replaced the 17.5 cents per gallon tax on diesel fuel with a 6 percent rate on the average wholesale price (HB 2313 provides a refund of 2.5 percent tax paid on diesel fuel for vehicles having a gross vehicle weight rating of 10,000 lb or less).\textsuperscript{43}

- Increased the sales and use tax from 4 to 4.3 percent.\textsuperscript{43}

- Allocated 0.675 percent of the generated revenue from sales tax to transportation needs, up from 0.5 percent.\textsuperscript{43}

- Imposed an annual $64 registration fee on hybrid electric, alternative fuel, and electric motor vehicles in addition to existing registration fees, with generated revenue designated for transportation maintenance projects.\textsuperscript{43}

- Increased the titling tax on the sale of motor vehicles from 3 percent to 4.15 percent.\textsuperscript{43}

- The bill prohibits tolling on Interstate 95 south of Fredericksburg without prior approval of the General Assembly.\textsuperscript{43}

In addition to the above statewide funding mechanisms, HB 2313 includes the following tax increases for the planning districts of Hampton Roads and the Northern Virginia Planning District, with the additionally generated revenue being dedicated to transportation projects within each planning district.\textsuperscript{43}

- An additional retail sales tax of 0.7 percent.\textsuperscript{43}

- An additional 2.1 percent tax on the wholesale price per gallon of gasoline.\textsuperscript{43}

The passage of HB 2313 is projected to raise $623.3 million in the 2014 fiscal year.\textsuperscript{44} Over the next five years (2013–2018) the bill is projected to generate $3.4 billion in additional statewide transportation funding, more than $1.5 billion in additional funding for Northern Virginia, and more than $1 billion in additional funding for Hampton Roads.\textsuperscript{42} The bill’s increased revenue is a
result of a tax structure that takes a percentage of the sales as opposed the previous flat-fee rate. The revenue generated from the percentage tax rate is expected to rise over time and reflect not only inflation, but fluctuations in the economy as well.45

Stakeholders

Since HB 2313 was a house bill that was voted on in the Virginia Senate and General Assembly, as opposed to a popular referendum voted on by the public; stakeholder groups were not officially identified for their inclusion in the process. There were numerous professional and grassroots organizations that both opposed and supported HB 2313, which are discussed below.

Messaging Strategies

The messaging strategy employed by supportive politicians was to convince the public that the current revenue structures were not capable of generating the money needed to maintain the current system, let alone make the improvements necessary to address the region’s congestion issues. The intent was to provide the public with the understanding that Virginia’s choice was to either disregard the significant needs of the state’s crumbling transportation infrastructure, or to provide funding mechanisms that would generate the revenue needed to maintain and invest in the future of the state’s transportation system.46

Governor McDowell rolled out his plan in an editorial in the Washington Post on January 20, 2013. The editorial made it clear that the state of Virginia needed a long-term solution to the funding challenges it faced with regard to the state’s transportation network, which he referred to as archaic. He explained that according to the state department of transportation, Virginia would need $500 million a year in new revenue just to eliminate the need for the state to borrow money for maintenance projects. The Governor pointed out that the practice of borrowing money is a funding mechanism for building new projects and that borrowing to maintain a decaying system is an unsustainable practice that would hamper the economic vitality of the state’s growing economy. The Governor’s statement included calling out the federal government for “kicking the can down the road” and emphatically stated that the time to do something is now: “Virginians shouldn't be forced to sit and wait in traffic while politics trumps effective governing.”41

Governor McDonnell used key words such as sustainable, long-term, economic growth, compromise, and solution to describe his plan and the outcomes that would result from action. This language communicated the need for tax reform and underlined not only what would be gained by taking action, but implicitly, the state’s risk from inaction. In addition to the governor’s message regarding the importance of gas tax reform and political action, HB 2313’s name: Virginia’s Road to the Future, indicates the positive messaging strategy used in order to sell the public on the bill.

The press coverage of the bill’s signing reiterated the use of positive messaging regarding the bill’s intent to raise new revenue for the state’s transportation network. The bill was slated as a bipartisan accomplishment that required both Democratic and Republican concessions to lay the groundwork for future prosperity for the state. Much of the press coverage noted that the issue of
transportation funding had not been addressed in decades, and that in many cases the unwillingness to raise taxes had led to political gridlocks, resulting in more kicking the can down the road. The Governor and his supporters reiterated their message that the tax had to be done, the time is now, and it will take sacrifice from all interests within the State of Virginia.47

**Advocates**

While there were not organized advocacy groups for HB 2313, there was a long list of supporters of the bill. According to Virginia’s official website for HB 2313, entitled “Virginia’s Road to the Future,” an extensive list of businesses, labor, and transportation groups supported HB 2313. In total, the site listed 62 businesses and organizations as supporters of HB 2313.48

In addition to the list of businesses supporting HB 2313, two polls were conducted to gauge public opinion regarding the bill. The first was conducted by the Wason Center for Public Policy at the Christopher Newport University. According to the poll, Virginians supported the Governor’s bill by a 2:1 margin. Dr. Quentin Kidd, the director of the Wason Center, stated that HB 2313 had public support, and that “this is the first time in a very long time that Virginians have supported any kind of transportation plan.”49

The Virginian Transportation Construction Alliance (VCTA) also conducted a statewide poll on transportation and found that the public supported the Governor’s plan by a 2:1 margin. The findings of the VTCA poll found that 83 percent of respondents felt it was important (either very or somewhat) that lawmakers pass a transportation funding plan. When asked if they favored the Governor’s transportation plan, 62 percent of respondents said they somewhat or strongly favored the plan. The poll also tested the bill across party lines and found that members of the public ranging from base Republican members to base Democrats favored the Governor’s proposal.50

When respondents were asked whether they preferred HB 2321 to an alternative plan that would raise the fuel tax by 10 cents, 69 percent preferred the funding mechanisms outlined in HB 2321. In addition, when asked whether they agreed that the State of Virginia needed a new long-term transportation funding plan as opposed to the State of Virginia continuing to wait to address the transportation plan, 69 percent of respondents agreed that the state needed to address the problem now rather than waiting.50

**Opponents**

HB 2313 experienced particularly vocal opposition from Americans for Prosperity (Figure 5), a conservative grassroots organization. Americans for Prosperity’s mission statement states that they are committed to educating and engaging citizens in the name of limited government and free markets on the local, state, and federal level. They often involve themselves in state and
local issues based on their interest in lowering taxes and limiting government spending and have publicly opposed numerous proposed state gas tax increases, including organized opposition to proposed gas tax hikes increases in Iowa, Maryland, and New Hampshire.

The group issued an “action alert” on their website, in order to raise awareness of the bill to their membership. The alert urged members to call, email, Facebook, and Tweet their delegate to ask them to oppose HB 2313. Americans for Prosperity’s Virginia State Director, Audrey Jackson explained that the group opposed the bill based on their stance as a “free-market, limited-government group” and that “[Americans for Prosperity] are all about keeping taxes low so people have more money in their pocket.” The proposed sales tax and registration fee increase for vehicles drew the ire of the organization. In addition to the action taken against HB 2313 online, Americans for Prosperity also held a rally at the Virginia State Capitol on January 30, 2013, to protest the proposed tax and fee hikes.

The Virginia Tea Party Federation, a coalition of 46 Tea Party affiliated groups across Virginia, adopted two resolutions in opposition of HB 2313. The first resolution denounced the proposed tax increases based on their belief that higher taxes are an example of a large, restrictive, and ineffective government. The second resolution called on Governor McDonnell to veto the bill based on the increased tax burden on citizens of the state of Virginia.

HB 2313 also faced opposition on the floors of the Virginia Senate and General Assembly. The majority of the base GOP in the General Assembly voted against the bill based on the increased tax burden on Virginians. Del. Timothy Hugo (R-Fairfax) explained that the tax increase was one that he “couldn’t stomach,” and noted that the bill “morphed from the original plan.” In all, 35 House Republicans voted against the bill, which cleared the General Assembly by a 60-40 vote.

In the Senate, the bill was passed by a 25-15 vote, with Senate Republicans citing the increased tax burden as their reason for opposing the bill. Sen. Ralph K. Smith (R-Roanoke) explained that in areas where unemployment is high and budgets are already stretched, the burden would be sending a difficult message that the government is “going to take a bigger chunk of your wages in multiple ways.”

Another significant source of opposition to the bill came from hybrid vehicle owners, who were particularly vocal regarding their belief that the new plan asked them to pay more than their fair share (Figure 6). In response to this opposition, the initially proposed annual fee of $100 per year for all hybrid, alternative fuel, and electric vehicles was reduced to $64 annually at the behest of Governor McDonnell, but the fee is still
seen by many as a disincentive to current and potential owners of more fuel efficient vehicles. The $36 reduction in the fee for hybrid vehicles was not enough to appease many of the critics of the fee, including the chairmen of the House Transportation Committee, Del. Tom Rust (R-Fairfax), who has stated his intent to repeal the fee altogether. Del. Scott A. Surovell (D-Fairfax) and Sen. Adam P. Ebbin (D-Alexandria) have strongly opposed the fee since it was proposed and have drafted legislation (as of fall 2013) to abolish the fee. Del. Surovell explained that he is considering whether to offer a refund to drivers who have paid the fee since July 1, 2013, stating that “this was horrible public policy to begin with,” and that “the hybrid tax essentially amounts to a virtue tax.”

Lessons Learned

The messaging strategy employed by the Governor’s office was effective. The Governor:

- Positively framed the plan and the potential outcomes from the plan (such as money for new transportation projects).
- Indicated a sense of urgency regarding the need to act now.
- Made it clear to the public that new revenues are absolutely necessary to support the rehabilitation and maintenance of the existing transportation infrastructure.
- Highlighted the fact that these goals could be achieved while simultaneously lowering gas taxes.

This package created a palatable combination of benefits that most Virginians seemed to favor, as reflected by the polling done by the Wason Center for Public Policy at the Christopher Newport University and the Virginian Transportation Construction Alliance. So while the plan did raise taxes, more Virginians favored raising the sales tax over the gas tax.

Wyoming

Circumstances

In early 2013, the Wyoming Legislature passed a fuel tax increase after failed attempts in previous sessions. The legislation had the support of various political organizations and special interest groups, and the endorsement of key legislative committees, including the Joint Interim Committee on Transportation, Highways, and Military Affairs. Governor Matt Mead and key legislative leadership united in support of House Bill 69, providing sufficient backing to move the bill through both houses, across the governor’s desk, and on to become law. The law increased gasoline and diesel taxes by 10 cents per gallon, from 14 to 24 cents, raising more than $70 million annually for the highway department, county and local roads, and state parks.
Stakeholders

Despite a dearth of political support in previous years, the fuel tax increase had ample supporting organizations and little organized opposition. The largest group in favor was a coalition of 16 statewide stakeholder groups named Save Wyoming’s Roads. The coalition included business groups, livestock and farming organizations, mining and petroleum groups, trucking and travel associations, and other miscellaneous organizations. Importantly, the governor and key leaders in both legislative houses supported the measure. Only one group explicitly opposed the legislation: the Wyoming Farm Bureau. Table 2 shows a breakdown of the formal support and opposition.

Table 2: Support for and Opposition to Wyoming’s Fuel Tax Increase

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support</th>
<th>Opposition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Johnson County Woolgrowers Association</td>
<td>Wyoming Farm Bureau</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wyoming Association of Municipalities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wyoming Association of Realtors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wyoming Business Alliance</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Wyoming Chamber Partnership</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wyoming Contractors Association</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Wyoming County Commissioners Association</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Wyoming Economic Development Association</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wyoming Lodging and Restaurant Association</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wyoming Mining Association</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Wyoming Pathways</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Wyoming Petroleum Marketers Association</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Wyoming Stock Growers Association</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Wyoming Taxpayers Association</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wyoming Travel Industry Coalition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wyoming Trucking Association</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Messaging Strategies

Advocates and opponents of the tax increase presented various messages to the public through several mediums.

Advocates

The advocates presented a particularly strong and coordinated effort in support of the fuel tax increase through the Save Wyoming’s Roads coalition. The coalition lobbied lawmakers and
published an appealing, informative, and intuitive website that clearly explained the issues to voters.

The website (Figure 7) was easy to use, and the information was very accessible, in both design and composition. The site used a mixture of infographics, text, and videos to convey information about increasing fuel taxes. The juxtaposition of communication methods created a compelling and pleasing visual experience that left the viewer with a positive feeling about the issues.

The website’s logo (Figure 8) incorporated several key visual themes, including an image of a road, a traffic sign, a thumbs-up indicating support for the legislation, and the group’s name—all of which was elegantly presented in a simple but striking visual package.

The website consisted of five sections, which the visitor could scroll or click through using the tabs at the top of the page to navigate. These sections included The Problem, The Solution, The Facts, The Coalition, and Get Involved. Each section focused on a distinct aspect of the coalition’s message, telling the story in a linear fashion for site visitors. The website explained the problem and why the visitor should care, described the solution, relayed facts about the problem and its importance, listed the members of the coalition, and provided an avenue for visitors to become involved in the effort.

Advocates consistently conveyed the same core set of messages about the fuel tax. The messaging strategy can be broken down into a few core components:
- Out-of-state motorists use the roads but do not pay their fair share in taxes; these visitors would pay the majority of the tax increase.
- Current funding sources are drying up.
- Roads are deteriorating, and if we don’t invest now, we will pay later.
- Good roads are good for the economy.
- Better roads increase safety.

The message occurring most frequently was one of equity. Out-of-state motorists use the roads but do not pay their fair share; these visitors would bear the majority share of the tax increase. They argued that, in essence, out-of-state motorists use the roads more than in-state motorists do, and as a result, would pay the majority burden of the tax. The governor and advocates frequently repeated this message, with the governor even raising it in his State of the State Address.63

**Opponents**

The opposition seemed less organized and had less support than the advocates. The core message from the opposition focused on the cost to Wyomingites. This message tended to focus on the difficult economic situation, and said that increasing taxes would only impose burdens on economically strained Wyomingites.

Another message the opposition used stated that WYDOT was inefficient and could not be trusted to use the funding effectively. Sen. Charles Scott said that many people believe the department of transportation is inefficient and “[constituents] cannot afford any more taxes.”37

Another opposition viewpoint argued that raising the tax would increase the cost of all goods. Sen. Curt Meier argued, “Raising the tax would increase the cost on everything that’s delivered over the roadways.”37

**Lessons Learned**

The Wyoming case is unusual in that the support for the fuel tax increase overwhelmed the opposition. Nonetheless, advocates used several effective strategies that could translate to other states. First, the advocates received strong backing from a broad coalition long before the measure came up for a vote. The coalition served as the voice for the advocacy and did an exceptional job conveying the supporting arguments.

The website for Save Wyoming’s Roads was easy to use and clearly relayed information to visitors. It explained simple political messages that seemed to resonate with visitors. The site provided many facts supporting the coalition’s position but did not overwhelm the visitor with data or confusing visuals.

The messaging was also consistent across the coalition members and politicians. Advocates frequently reiterated the message about how the current system subsidized out-of-state motorists,
and that these motorists would bear most of the costs from the increased tax. Proponents repeated this message like a drumbeat, with it coming up in newspaper articles, websites, and important state speeches.

**Pennsylvania**

_Circumstances_

In 2011, Pennsylvania Governor Tom Corbett created the Transportation Funding Advisory Commission, with the charge of “developing a comprehensive, strategic proposal for addressing the transportation funding needs of Pennsylvania.” The 40-member expert commission provided a variety of recommendations through their 70-page report, laying out a comprehensive plan for how the state could overhaul its transportation funding system. In November 2013, the Pennsylvania Legislature passed and the Governor signed into law several key provisions that increased transportation funding for the state.

The total package is estimated to increase transportation revenues by $2.3 billion per year, representing a 40 percent increase over the state DOT’s previous funding levels. The measure includes a variety of provisions, but the following is a list of the most significant components:

- The elimination of the previous 12 cent per gallon gasoline tax.
- An increase in the Oil Company Franchise Tax, a wholesale fuel tax that uses a complex formula to annually adjust the tax to somewhat track fuel price changes.
- A $5 increase in the fee for vehicle registrations for local transportation improvements, and indexing the fees to inflation, with the annual inflationary increase capped at 3 percent.
- Setting the driver’s license registration fee to increase with inflation.
- Increases in some traffic violation penalties; for example, the fine for running a stop sign increases from $25 to $150, a 500 percent increase.

The largest components of this tax reform were the elimination of the 12-cent fuel tax and the revision of the Oil Company Franchise Tax. While complex and potentially confusing, the details of this change are important to understanding how Pennsylvania increased its transportation funding. For a quick reference, Table 3 and Table 4 provide a graphical depiction of the tax reform for gasoline and diesel, respectively.

The new tax eliminates the point-of-sale 12 cent per gallon gasoline tax and increases the wholesale Oil Company Franchise Tax. The Pennsylvania Department of Revenue is responsible for calculating the exact total of the tax each year using a complex formula. The formula is essentially the “average wholesale price of gasoline,” multiplied by a given percent, and then rounded to the next highest tenth of a percent.
Adding to the formula’s complexity, the average wholesale price of gasoline mentioned above is not based on the actual average wholesale price of gasoline for at least the first two years of the tax. Instead of using the actual wholesale gasoline price, the Pennsylvania government sets a rate that it will use as a given price, which changes each year. Starting in 2016, the rate is set using the actual average wholesale gasoline price, provided the price is at least $2.99. If not, the state sets a price floor for the calculation at $2.99. Additionally, the given percent by which the average wholesale gasoline price is multiplied by changes each year through 2018, at which point it remains constant.

Table 3: Pennsylvania Oil Company Franchise Tax - Gasoline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Average Wholesale Gasoline Price</th>
<th>Multiplication Factor</th>
<th>Resulting Per Gallon Tax</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>$1.87</td>
<td>.2175</td>
<td>$0.407</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>$2.49</td>
<td>.2025</td>
<td>$0.505</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>$2.49</td>
<td>.2015</td>
<td>$0.502</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>$\geq 2.99</td>
<td>.1945</td>
<td>$\geq 0.582</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018+</td>
<td>$\geq 2.99</td>
<td>.1925</td>
<td>$\geq 0.576</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Finally, the process for diesel tax is similar, but uses slightly different figures, as seen in the table below.

Table 4: Pennsylvania Oil Company Franchise Tax - Diesel

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Average Wholesale Diesel Price</th>
<th>Multiplication Factor</th>
<th>Resulting Per Gallon Tax</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>$1.87</td>
<td>.2725</td>
<td>$0.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>$2.49</td>
<td>.2575</td>
<td>$0.642</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>$2.49</td>
<td>.2565</td>
<td>$0.639</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>$\geq 2.99</td>
<td>.2495</td>
<td>$\geq 0.747</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018+</td>
<td>$\geq 2.99</td>
<td>.2475</td>
<td>$\geq 0.74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Stakeholders

Several groups lined up in support and opposition to the transportation funding reforms in Pennsylvania. The political struggle was relatively short-lived.

Advocates

Several groups formally supported the fuel tax reforms, although none seems to have actively organized support for the measure. Those in support included:

- The Pennsylvania Chamber of Business and Industry.
• State construction and engineering organizations.
• The Pennsylvania chapter of AAA.
• AARP.
• School bus operators.
• Commercial trucking companies.\textsuperscript{68}

Pennsylvania Governor Tom Corbett introduced the plan and was a strong public supporter.

\textit{Opposition}

Only a few groups formally opposed the measure. These include certain members of the Pennsylvania Republican Party, who swore to repeal the measure following its passage, and the Pennsylvania Food Merchants Association, who opposed the plan’s dependence on gas tax revenue.

\textit{Messaging Strategies}

The Pennsylvania case presents an interesting twist on increasing transportation revenues. Instead of attempting to raise the gasoline tax, like many states, Gov. Corbett explicitly rejected that idea as an option for the Transportation Advisory Commission to consider. He was looking for a politically feasible, alternative way to fund the transportation system.

The resulting tax system, which moved the fuel tax up the supply chain to the wholesale level, seems to have taken the gas tax—a tax that many Americans do not understand—and made it less clear.\textsuperscript{69} It was accomplished by using the complex calculation formulas and placing the tax under the guise of a corporate franchise tax. Doing so enabled supporters to use three distinct messaging strategies.

The first was the implication that oil companies would pay the tax and might not pass it on to consumers. This classic messaging strategy implies that an outside group, which is unfavorably viewed by the public (oil companies), would end up paying the higher taxes, and not the public. It was implied that shifting the tax up to the wholesale level would not harm consumers, but would make the oil companies pay their fair share. While the accuracy of these claims is debatable, this classic messaging strategy—called \textit{outgrouping}—seemed effective.

The second messaging strategy is somewhat an extension of the first. By using complex formulas and assumptions regarding how the oil companies might bear the cost of the tax increase, the cost to the average motorist could not be determined. That made it harder for opposition groups
to rally against the tax increase, as they had no way of determining what it would actually cost consumers.

The third messaging strategy was a combination of more traditional strategies—that increasing transportation funding would make the roads safer, reduce congestion, and improve the economy. The Governor’s statement during the midst of the legislative deliberations typifies these messages, “Today, the state Senate kept the momentum moving on a dramatic piece of legislation that will keep our children safe, keep our businesses open, and improve the quality of life for all Pennsylvanians. A comprehensive transportation plan has been years in the making, and with today's vote we have taken yet another step to preserve Pennsylvania's future.”

*Lessons Learned*

This case presents some unique lessons that could have external relevance. The first is that funding complexities made selling the tax increase easier to pass in Pennsylvania. The gas tax is already unfamiliar to most Americans. The new formula-based approach is difficult to understand and many of the media organizations that attempted to describe it got some of the more salient elements incorrect. The confusion resulting from the complicated structure of the tax may have made it difficult to argue against and stymied many of the opposition’s rhetorical points.

A second lesson is the use of outgroups. The governor sold the tax as an increase on a group the public does not identify with, and many dislike. Doing so may have made the tax more politically palatable and helped the governor gain the needed votes.

Finally, the governor used a technical advisory committee that served as a third party to help argue the need for increased taxes. The report they developed provided findings and talking points for the state. Figure 9 illustrates a graphical example from their request.

**Atlanta**

*Circumstances*

On June 2, 2010, the Georgia legislature passed the Transportation Investment Act of 2010 (TIA), which included the establishment of the special purpose local option sales tax referred to as T-SPLOST. The legislation created 12 transportation districts throughout the state of Georgia by following state designated regional commission boundaries. Each individual transportation district was charged with assembling a list of needed transportation projects. In the summer of 2012, voters within each district voted “yes” or “no” on whether to approve an additional one percent sales tax to fund the transportation projects identified within each respective district. The following sections report on the actions and outcomes of one of the 12 transportation districts—the Atlanta Regional Transportation District.
Atlanta Regional Roundtable

The Atlanta Regional Transportation District, known as the “Atlanta Regional Roundtable” included the counties of Cherokee, Fulton, Cobb, Gwinnett, DeKalb, Rockdale, Henry, Fayette, Douglas, and Clayton. The Atlanta Regional Roundtable was comprised of the chief elected official of each of the 10 counties, a mayor delegate elected at large by all mayors in the region, and the mayor of Atlanta. The Atlanta Regional Roundtable also elected a five member executive committee from within its ranks that was charged with developing a draft investment list for consideration and approval by the entire roundtable. This case study focuses on the messaging strategies employed by advocates and opponents of the public referendum to fund the final list of projects approved by the Atlanta Regional Roundtable.

Atlanta Background

In 2012, the Atlanta region faced a significant transportation funding shortfall. The region identified more than $120 billion in transportation needs over the next 30 years, but expected to receive only $60 billion in funding from federal, state, and local sources. In addition, 70 percent of the $60 billion in known funding would need to be spent on maintaining the existing transportation network, leaving little funding to expand the existing network in order to meet the region’s future needs.72 In fall 2011, the Atlanta Regional Roundtable announced that it had approved a list of 157 projects throughout the 10 counties at a total cost of $6.14 billion. The region wide referendum in summer 2012 allowed voters to decide whether to fund the list of projects through a 1 percent increase in local sales tax. The measure failed significantly, with only 257,942 votes in favor and 417,593 votes against.62 In addition to failing in the Atlanta Region, this approach to increasing transportation funding as a whole did not fare well throughout the state, with only three of twelve transportation districts approving the sales tax increase to fund their respective list of transportation projects.73

Stakeholders

Two main groups led the advocacy for the sales tax increase: the Citizens for Transportation Mobility (CTM) and the Metro Atlanta Voters Education Network (MAVEN). CTM, a non-profit organization, was led by local business leaders including real-estate, banking interests as well as representatives from the Atlanta chamber of commerce. Figure 10: MAVEN Ad. http://www.blogfordemocracy.org/2011/11/metro-atlanta-voter-education-network.html
MAVEN was a coalition of businesses and civic groups that organized a public information campaign to educate voters about the transportation funding proposition (Figure 10). The non-profit organization was also led by local business leaders, including a senior member of the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce and a former senior staff member of the state’s Lieutenant Governor.

The group leading the opposition was the Transportation Leadership Coalition, LLC. This group developed the website TrafficTruth.net, which published detailed fact sheets, videos, and blog postings opposing the measure. Stakeholders who publicly opposed the measure also included The Sierra Club, the NAACP, and the Georgia Tea Party. 71

**Messaging Strategies**

Advocates and opponents of the tax increase presented various messages to the public through several mediums.

**Advocates**

Advocates of the tax increase raised a war chest of $6.5 million dollars in order to run their “Untie Atlanta” campaign (Figure 11). These funds were used largely to advertise via mailers, door-to-door canvassing, phone banks, and television advertising in order to educate the public on the transportation funding shortfalls that the region faced. 62 The main points that both CTM and MAVEN made in favor of increasing the sales tax in order to make up for the $60 billion shortfall were that the passage of the measure would:

- Provide congestion relief.
- Protect existing investments.
- Provide additional travel options.
- Make travel safer and more efficient.
In addition to generating the needed revenue in order to address the funding shortfalls, CTM and MAVEN focused their messaging strategy around the potential for economic development resulting in the passage of the measure. They argued that voting yes on the measure would:

- Generate jobs.
- Unclog congestion.
- Demonstrate to industries considering Atlanta that the region could solve its transportation problems.

The two main advocacy groups also worked to educate voters and drive voter turnout on election day. MAVEN focused on education, while CTM focused on voter turnout.74

**Opponents**

The tax initiative was heavily criticized by a variety of opponents, which played a major role in the measure’s downfall. The influential groups spread across the state and political landscape, and included the NAACP, the Sierra Club, the state’s Tea Party Patriots, and Senators Chip Rogers, R-Woodstock, and Vincent Fort, D-Atlanta.75 From the outset, the Tea Party attacked a project list that they claimed squandered resources on transit projects, yet the Georgia chapter of the Sierra Club announced their opposition on the basis that the list lavished generous sums on new roads, while not allocating enough resources for transit projects.

For its part, the state NAACP took exception to a plan that did too little to promote transportation equity, claiming that the composition of the regional roundtable was not representative of the region’s minority base and that increasing sales tax as opposed to gas tax was a regressive strategy to generate new transportation revenue. In addition, the NAACP cited the fact that the residents of DeKalb and Fulton Counties, which are largely comprised of African American residents, had supported MARTA (Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority) with a penny sales tax since the 1970s, yet the roundtable’s list of projects had not allocated enough resources to build a rail line to South DeKalb, a project that had been requested for years (the list allocated $225 million, enough for buses, but not rail).62


- The tax was erroneously being sold as traffic relief when in fact it was largely a bail out for MARTA and a funding mechanism for mass transit projects that only 2 percent of citizens would ultimately use.76

- Regional planners conceded the T-PLOST project list would do little to reduce commute times; ignoring studies that propose intersection improvements and express bus projects provide a reasonable return on investment.
Traffic relief was the goal of those who proposed the regional sales tax to the legislature; however, powerful in-town interests repurposed the $8 billion into a “bait and switch.”

The project list is a trap for taxpayers that consumes 52 percent of the money on rail transit projects, many of which are initial phases, multi-decade projects that will require taxpayer support every 10 years and do little to reduce traffic. In addition, T-SPLOST funds $120 million per mile for pet projects such as BRT/Light Rail to Cumberland Mall and the Atlanta Beltline, a project of great political interest to in-town leaders that will do absolutely nothing to reduce traffic.

The Transportation Leadership Coalition, leading the dissent, opposed the tax referendum, claiming the plan would allocate more than half of the funds to expensive transit projects, providing limited congestion relief within 10 years. Their website, TrafficTruth.net, included information on the project lists, a point-by-point fact sheet, and efforts to raise money for the opposition’s effort against the tax increase (Figure 12). 67, 77

Lessons Learned

The Atlanta case provides a few lessons that could apply to other cases. First, it appears the individuals who developed the initiative list did not ensure that important stakeholders supported the proposition from the outset. Influential political advocacy groups from a variety of different political persuasions were heavily critical of the measure, which, independent of all other factors, could have doomed the effort. Reaching out to these important stakeholders early in the policy development process could have gone a long way to preventing many of the struggles the advocates faced.

Another issue that may have contributed to the measure’s downfall was the lack of a unified messaging strategy. Multiple groups argued on behalf of the measure, each emphasizing different aspects. These conflicting and disorganized strategies may have led to the voter confusion and a
failure to understand why the tax increase was merited. A consistent messaging strategy that frequently reiterated the exact same core set of arguments would have been more effective than a haphazard collection of messages.

The messages may have also been too complex for voters to understand. Some of the messages conveyed may have been too lengthy or nuanced. While subjective, some of the messages may have also been insufficiently powerful to elicit the desired reaction. For example, the “Untie Atlanta” message provides a visual metaphor (traffic tied up in a knot) that, to a voter, could be unclear. From a symbolic perspective, a knot provides many benefits and is often useful. Why should a voter wish to untie Atlanta if the knot is making the region stronger?
Messaging Best Practices

This report provides a review of the funding messaging strategies seen in the literature, as well as those seen in several recent attempts to increase state and local transportation funding. While interesting from an academic perspective, how can this information be practically applied? The following section distills the information into a handful of actionable strategies that practitioners can use when attempting to increase transportation funding.

Potential Messaging Strategies for Transportation Funding

**Focus on How Transportation Investment Can Benefit the Economy**

The message that transportation investments will pay economic dividends was widely used throughout the case studies and emphasized in the literature as a best practice. In a time when many state economies are still recovering from the Great Recession, messages about economic growth opportunities are likely to resonate with citizens.

This strategy could be especially powerful when business interests or third parties present it, as was the case in Connecticut with the TSB and in Wyoming where a coalition of business groups argued, “Good roads are good for the economy.” It also works well when prominent political figures, like Gov. R. McDonnell of Virginia, make this a large part of their messaging strategy.

**Implement Incrementally**

Raising taxes can be a bitter pill for some stakeholders and constituents to swallow. Part of the recent success some states have had at increasing transportation funding may be the result of messaging related to gradually and incrementally implementing tax reforms. Connecticut timed its successful tax increase to gradually ramp up over an eight-year period. Similarly, Maryland enacted legislation that phased in a three percent, at-the-pump sales tax increase over a three-year period. These case studies suggest that the initial opposition to increased taxation can be overcome by strategies aimed at implementation over time, as opposed to asking the public to shoulder an increased financial burden all at one time.

**When Possible, Tie Funding to Specific Projects and Provide Transparency to Increase Public Trust**

In an era of economically difficult times, transportation is hardly the only public policy area that could benefit from additional revenue. There are many competing interests in the public policy process, each vying for their share of revenues and arguing that their need is most dire. This ubiquitous need can create the temptation to move revenues from their originally intended purpose to other areas of need. While understandable, such uses can dilute public trust, decrease transparency, and create the perception of a bait and switch. Stated differently, the public fears lawmakers will increase taxes for one stated purpose, and then use those revenues for other purposes.
Political opponents to tax increases often point to these occasions as examples of why voters should not support a proposed increase, arguing that government cannot be trusted with the people’s money. For example, former Maryland Cabinet Secretary Larry Hogan claimed that the Maryland state government would not spend the gas tax revenue wisely; arguing that over $1B already had been diverted from the Transportation Trust Fund. The same argument was used by the Maryland Public Policy Institute and the Gasoline and Automotive Service Dealers of America.

A strategy that can neutralize opponent’s criticism and simultaneously build a strong case for increased revenues is to not only ensure that funds are used for their intended purpose, but also identify and connect specific transportation projects to the increased revenues. Doing so bolsters transparency in the budgeting process and shows voters and stakeholders that their money will be spent wisely and on the originally intended purposes.

Virginia and Connecticut both were partially successful by tying revenues to specific projects. The Virginia law included an increased registration fee on hybrid and alternative fuel vehicles that dedicated the additional revenue to transportation maintenance. Connecticut’s law also included a specific list of projects on which the generated revenue would be spent. Clearly, generating support for a transportation funding mechanism can be easier if the public knows that the money will fund specific transportation projects.

Keep Messages Simple, Concise, and Consistent

When crafting a messaging strategy for increasing transportation funding, it is common for technically proficient parties to attempt to convey the complex details regarding exactly why new funding is needed. While often an earnest attempt at transparency, relying too heavily on this style of communication is ineffective. The electorate and many stakeholders will respond more favorably to concise and simple messages that express the extent of the need and convey why it is important and what benefits would be personally obtained (see Figure 1 for an example of a simple and concise message used in Wyoming).

All of the successful case studies used clear and concise messaging strategies to effectively argue their position to a varied opposition. Not only does this enable the public to easily comprehend the campaign’s key points, but it also makes it easier for all proponents to maintain consistency in their messaging. As the Atlanta case study exemplifies, opponents can use a lack of clarity and consistency to dismantle a successful campaign.

Additionally, repeating the message in different venues can help to reinforce its importance and implant it in stakeholder’s minds. In Wyoming, for example, the advocates frequently raised their core message that out-of-state motorists were costing the state money, and they would pay the majority of the newly raised fuel tax. The repetition of this message helped sell the electorate and important stakeholders on the benefits of increasing the fuel tax.
The Costs of Taking Action Now Are Less than Continued Inaction

While not a strategy mentioned in all case studies, several states successfully used this powerful message to persuade citizens and stakeholders. Virginia used it to pass a multi-faceted and innovative transportation funding bill. The key to this strategy was clearly demonstrating to the public that the revenue system in place was so insufficient that it fell short of both funding new projects and even maintaining the current transportation system. At that point, Gov. R. McDonnell presented the public with two options: allow the system to fall deeper into disrepair and allow congestion to worsen, or be proactive and agree on new transportation funding.

An Independent Technical Committee Can Serve as a Strong Messenger

As exemplified in the Connecticut and Pennsylvania case studies, committees such as the Transportation Strategy Board and the Transportation Funding Advisory Commission can serve as a source of unbiased technical information. Such an entity can help strengthen the case for increasing transportation funding. Furthermore, using a technically proficient neutral party can enable a better understanding of the implications of a degrading transportation system, allowing advocates to anticipate messaging strategies the opposition may use to derail the plan.

Involve Stakeholders Early and Often

Influential political advocacy groups from a variety of different political persuasions were heavily critical of the Atlanta proposal. Many of the grievances they raised could have been addressed had the advocates reached out to them early in the policy development process. In the years preceding Wyoming’s successful legislative measure, similar attempts had resulted in failure. Learning from these mistakes, proponents were able to retool their messaging strategies and gain support from various political organizations and special interest groups, while receiving a key endorsement from the Joint Interim Committee on Transportation, Highways, and Military Affairs.
Conclusion

Facing declining revenues and increasing transportation costs, several states recently attempted to increase transportation revenues through a variety of policy mechanisms. Of those considered in this report, most were successful, and their success is at least partially attributable to their ability to effectively communicate the need to increase transportation revenues to the electorate, legislators, and a variety of stakeholders.

The states often gathered a strong coalition of supporters who helped spread the message that their state needed increased transportation revenues. They ensured their messages were simple, powerful, consistent, and backed by data. Governors used their bully pulpit to argue that a core component of fiscal responsibility was making smart investments in the future. Business groups produced websites that touted the economic benefits of a robust transportation system. These coalitions helped to shape the discussion in their states and get transportation revenue on the political agenda.

The failure seen in Atlanta was partially attributable to poor messaging. The messages put forward were inconsistent and muddy, several important stakeholder groups were not brought into the process, and the fervent anti-tax movement of the time proved difficult to overcome.

Texas is facing many of the same transportation funding issues seen around the country. If the state decides to pursue increased transportation revenues, the experience of other states may provide useful guidance. Successful states ensured that key stakeholders are brought into the process early. Several successful states were able to grow their coalition by setting revenues to increase incrementally over a period of years. They also tied funding to specific projects. Finally, several successful states relied on a third party (like an advisory committee) to provide technical information about the state’s transportation needs. This third party helped to validate the coalition’s messages and convince legislators.

When orchestrating a messaging strategy, states focused on the economic benefits of investing in transportation. Gathering a strong business coalition that loudly and continually argues this point can help to sway some stakeholders who might normally oppose tax increases. Another powerful messaging strategy states used is arguing that investments in the transportation system today would save the state money in the future.
References


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