

Gas tax hike still opposed by most New Jerseyans, poll shows

by Steve Strunsky | October 10, 2014



A Rutgers-Eagleton Poll released today shows 58 percent of those surveyed opposed raising the state's gas tax, versus 66 percent opposed in a similar poll taken in April. (*Patti Sapone/The Star-Ledger*)

A clear majority of New Jerseyans still oppose raising the gasoline tax to fix the state's roads, rails and bridges, though opposition to a hike has softened since April, according to a Rutgers-Eagleton poll released today.

Among 842 residents polled by phone between Sept. 29 and Oct. 5, 58 percent said they opposed raising the tax even if it were "dedicated solely to paying for roads, bridges, and other transportation costs," while 38 percent said they would support a hike. Undecideds made up 4 percent.

In a similar poll by Rutgers' Eagleton Institute of Politics taken in April, 66 percent of respondents said they opposed hiking the gas tax, while 31 percent said they supported the idea.

"While we see some shift towards more support, it is not yet clear if this is a blip or real change," said David Redlawsk, a political science professor at Rutgers and director of the Eagleton poll. "Anyone who drives in New Jersey knows the roads and bridges are in terrible shape, but there seem to be little will to raise the funds needed to fix them."

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Whether to raise the gas tax has become one of the most pressing public questions in New Jersey as the state Transportation Trust Fund nears a point next year where it will only be able to pay off existing debt, with no spare cash for new projects or maintenance. The trust fund pays for transportation projects, including maintenance of the state's mass transit system, with money raised mainly by the gas tax.

The state Assembly transportation committee chairman, Assemblyman John Wisniewski (D-Middlesex) is holding a series of hearings — the next one scheduled for Tuesday at Rutgers in Piscataway — on how to replenish the fund, while Senate President Steven Sweeney (D-Gloucester), has been touring the state's crumbling roads and bridges calling on Gov. Chris Christie to produce a transportation funding plan. The Republican governor and potential 2016 presidential candidate has resisted raising the tax since taking office in 2010, but said recently that "nothing is off the table."

When asked about public opposition to a gas tax hike following his committee's first hearing last month, Wisniewski said one goal of the series was to educate the public on the need for transportation funding.

The politically sensitive gas tax has not been raised since 1988, and is now the second lowest in the nation after Alaska's, another state with notoriously potholed roads and antiquated bridges. New Jersey's tax amounts to 14.5 cents a gallon when totaling a 10.5-cent motor fuels tax charged at the pump and a 4-cent petroleum gross receipts paid by distributors.

Opposition to a gas tax hike was stronger among Republicans (67 percent) than Democrats (52 percent), while poorer residents tended to oppose a hike in the essentially regressive tax more strongly than wealthier ones.

Beyond the initial question asking simply whether they would support a tax hike, respondents were then given a choice of three types of tax increases to fund transportation needs: a 15-cent per gallon increase, or doubling, of the existing gas tax (17 percent in favor); a 7 percent tax on gas purchases — essentially extending the existing state sales tax to gasoline (18 percent) ; or borrowing to pay for transportation needs (8 percent).

Most, or 54 percent, chose none of the above.

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