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Adams: Gas tax could fix road work backlog

by Libby Tucker
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Naito Parkway is arguably the most polished street in Portland. After a \$10 million reconstruction, the downtown waterfront boulevard has new traffic signals, wide sidewalks and crisp, white bike lanes that accentuate the road's smooth, black asphalt.

But if Naito Parkway rides like a dream, Beaverton-Hillsdale Highway and the other miles of unimproved city streets are the monsters under the bed.

With a \$422 million road maintenance backlog that grows by \$9 million each year, the Portland Office of Transportation has a list of paving projects literally 3,941 miles long.

"We should be doing dozens of these kinds of Naito Parkway refurbishings all over the city," Sam Adams, Portland transportation commissioner, said Friday at a celebration marking Naito Parkway's reopening after a year of construction. "We just simply do not have enough money to do it."

To ensure prettier streets in more Portland neighborhoods, Adams is shopping around a citywide gas tax, a street maintenance fee for businesses and property owners, and a range of seven other funding possibilities.

The money would pay for safety and maintenance projects only, he said, and would not be applied to transit projects such as the Portland Streetcar, MAX light-rail system or bus service. Projects that improve access to transit such as sidewalks and bike lanes would be considered, however.

Council, not voters, may decide tax's fate

The most ambitious of Adams' funding schemes would boost the Office of Transportation's project budget as much as \$420 million over 10 years and eliminate the backlog. The least costly proposal would raise \$230 million and cut the backlog in half.

Public opinion surveys paid for by the city said 51 percent of Portland voters would support a gas tax of 10.3 cents per gallon and 54 percent would support a street maintenance fee of \$3.49 per month for the average household. The margin of error was 5.6 percent.

The surveys, conducted by Davis, Hibbitts and Midghall consultants in March, polled 1,500 registered voters in Portland.

Over the next month, Adams will talk to residents and businesses about three different funding scenarios for a specific list of projects proposed by each neighborhood.

Depending on how well the proposals are received, the commissioner may bypass a voter referendum and take the funding package directly to City Council for approval, he said. A petition to overturn City Council's decision would then be the only recourse for voters unhappy with the decision.

"The street maintenance fee would be easier (to put through council) than the gas tax, but who's to say?" Bill Wyatt, executive director of the Port of Portland, said. "I think the important thing is to go out and build support for it."

As the owner of 10,000 acres in Portland, the port anticipates paying a substantial sum to the proposed street maintenance fee, which would vary based on the amount of traffic a business generates. The port, however, generally supports Adams' proposal because it "has as much obligation as anyone to pay," Wyatt said.

The city's regional partners are also on board with the plan, saying a Portland gas tax would not detract from taxes and fees proposed by other agencies. Two cities – Tigard and Milwaukie – in the Portland metropolitan area already have a gas tax in place. Five metro cities charge street maintenance fees.

Regional government Metro and Multnomah County are also considering levying taxes to pay for transportation improvements.

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"At first local governments were resistant to (a gas tax); now the light bulb's gone off," Jason Tell, Portland metro manager for the Oregon Department of Transportation, said. "Hopefully ODOT can find a way to build on it."

But neighborhoods and businesses view the commissioner's proposal with cautious optimism.

Many neighborhood projects have sat unfunded on the city's transportation improvement plan for decades. And residents are tired of waiting for the city to tackle street improvements near their homes and schools while road construction is at an all-time high in the city center, Wes Risher, a member of the Southwest Neighborhoods Inc. transportation committee, said.

"There's an equity issue here," Risher said. "What Sam is proposing is overdue. ... Portland deserves to have decent streets; it's time."

Southwest Portland, incorporated into the city from Multnomah County in the 1950s, has 127 miles of unpaved streets and the fewest sidewalks of any neighborhood in the city.

Adams will hold the first of five town hall meetings on the proposed funding plan from 7 to 9 p.m. today at the Multnomah Arts Center, 7688 S.W. Capitol Highway.