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Fix the highways, quit ripping off special funds

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A significant piece of legislation was left unfinished and largely undiscussed at the Capitol this session, and perhaps that's just as well, given the state's precarious finances.

But we hope Gov. Linda Lingle's proposed \$4.2 billion highway improvement plan, rolled out in February with the backing of key Democratic leaders, gets a spot near the front of the line in the 2010 session.

The plan is an ambitious and costly one, but it is sorely needed. Like so many of Hawaii's infrastructure projects, road construction and maintenance have been deferred to the point that cheap fixes simply won't get the job done anymore.

On the Neighbor Islands especially, traffic congestion is constricting the local economies, weighing heavily on businesses and residents, and leaving tourists with horror stories to share with the folks back home.

There is no way the state's existing gas and vehicle taxes can pay for the scope of work proposed — 183 projects on six islands. So that means an accelerated schedule of tax and fee increases, costing the average Hawaii driver \$170 a year more.

That will be a tough sell even as the economy improves.

It's not just the money. It's a trust issue.

Hawaii taxpayers have grown accustomed to being duped by governors and legislators who set up special funds for some laudable public project, then drain away the money when times get tight. Or they don't even bother with pretense — they increase fees and dump it all into the bottomless general fund.

Only last week, a Honolulu City Council committee voted to raise the county gas tax by 3 cents a gallon to 19.5 cents, not to fix roads, but to help plug a budget gap.

Hawaii's sorry history of raiding special funds is a cynic's delight. Over the years, the hurricane relief fund, the tobacco tax, Oahu's transit tax, the transient accommodations tax, the rental car tax, conveyance fees and yes, the highway fund have all been considered for diversion.

And this week came the news, thanks to Sean Hao of The Honolulu Advertiser, that the Legislature is stealing \$16 million from a cell phone tax that was supposed to pay for enhanced 911 technology.

So why should drivers believe that extra \$170 will actually go to fix roads? We suggest an iron-clad,

no-ripoff guarantee be built into the legislation.

Hawaii's 1950s highway system needs to be hauled into the 21st century, a job that's going to cost a lot of money and provide a lot of jobs through the end of the next decade.

Hawaii's leaders need to be straight about what it's going to cost and commit to spending any new road tax revenue exclusively on highway work.

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