

Lawmakers spar over gasoline taxes

DeGette backs increase; Musgrave sees options

By John J. Sanko
ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

Two members of Colorado's congressional delegation clashed Friday over whether there's a need to hike federal gasoline taxes to pay for the nation's aging and crowded roads and bridges.

"It's time for us to make that difficult choice," Rep. Diana DeGette, D-Denver, told 400 business leaders attending the sixth annual Colorado Congressional Transportation Summit.

"We can't afford to shortchange our nation's transportation system. We've got to invest in the future and we've got to do it now."

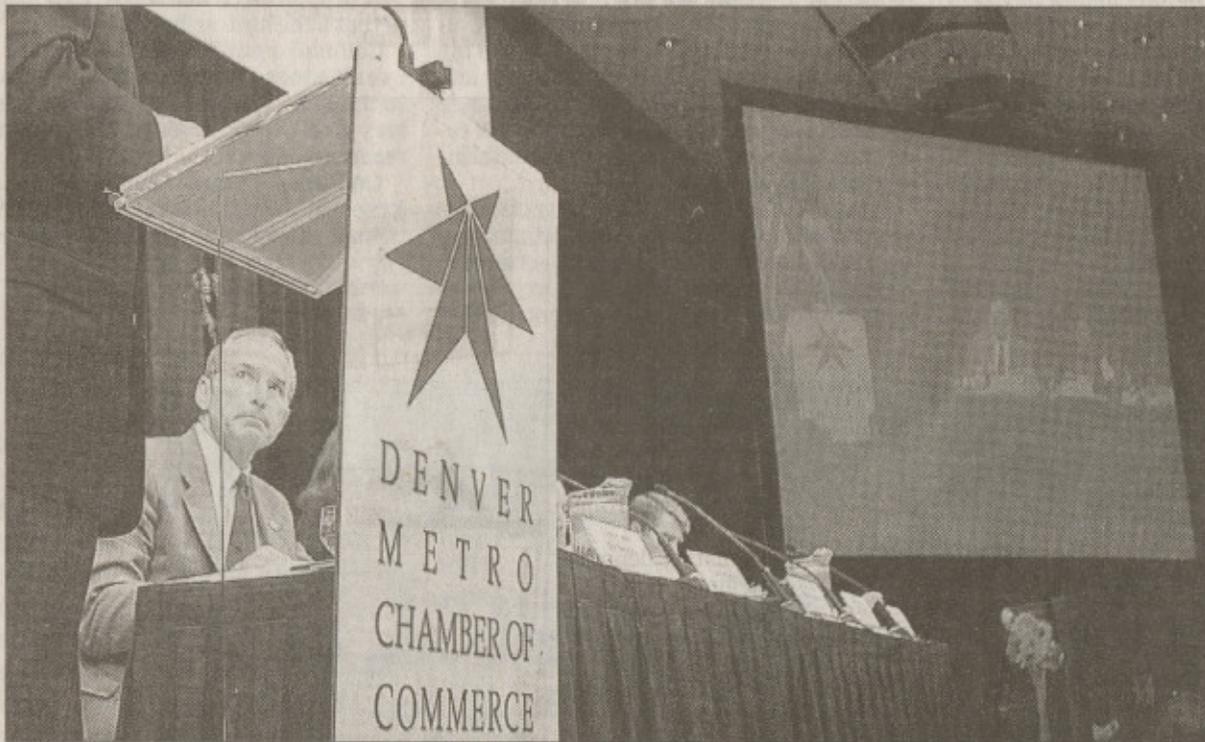
More money is needed for roads, agreed Rep. Marilyn Musgrave, R-Fort Morgan, but it shouldn't be done "on the backs of the people" by imposing higher fuel taxes.

"We can get more money into roads without raising our gas tax," Musgrave said. "The gas tax is a very regressive tax. It's hardest on our working poor."

Ironically, the disagreement came minutes after Joe Blake, president of the host Denver Metro Chamber of Commerce, praised Colorado's delegation for working together on transportation issues.

Actually, both DeGette and Musgrave agree more money is needed; they just disagreed on how to get it. Even DeGette mentioned how closely the delegation had worked together.

Reps. Mark Udall, D-Colo., and Bob Beauprez, R-Colo., who also were at the summit, said the tax increase was an is-



Joe Blake, president and CEO of the Denver Metro Chamber of Commerce, introduces U.S. Rep. Bob Beauprez on Friday at the sixth annual Colorado Congressional Transportation Summit at the Denver Performing Arts Complex.

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sue that needed study. Neither would rule out an increase, although both said they would prefer not to do it.

Congress has delayed until next year a final decision on funding levels in the TEA-21 federal transportation funding program, but DeGette and Musgrave are on opposite sides in the tax increase issue.

DeGette noted it was a Republican, Rep. Don Young of Alaska, chairman of the House Transportation Committee, who has been pushing for "indexing" of federal gas taxes — letting them move up automatically with inflation.

The federal gas tax, at 18.4 cents per gal-

lon, has not been increased since 1993. Colorado gets 38 percent of its annual transportation budget from the federal government.

Straight indexing is expected to raise an additional \$15 billion over the six-year life of the program. But it would raise \$75 billion if a 5-cent increase is tacked on to begin with as some have urged.

Young is pushing for \$375 billion in the federal reauthorization bill for transportation.

In addition to indexing, Congress is considering whether to return more money to the states. Colorado gets back 90.5 percent of money going into the federal highway fund.

Other proposals include tolling, cracking down on fuel tax evasion, eliminating the 5.2 cents per gallon federal tax exemption on ethanol and drawing down on the existing highway trust fund.

"I'm sorry to report that all these other suggestions (for getting money) won't get us there," DeGette said. "If you're talking about \$375 billion in needs, all these proposals together won't come close."

"We have to do this. If you want to build roads, you have to get the money."

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