

# Tom Miller: Highway bond initiative unlikely to come before voters this year

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The Herald-Dispatch

Voters in West Virginia have decided the fate of more than 120 amendments to the state's constitution at the ballot box starting in 1880. These issues have usually been decided at the regular general elections that occur every two years.

But there have been a few instances when special elections were scheduled to consider changes in the state constitution and in 1973, there were no less than four suggested constitutional revisions decided in a special statewide election.

Several of those amendments have addressed the increasing need to provide a "system of state roads and highways," beginning with the Good Roads Amendment of 1920 that voters endorsed by nearly a 2-1 majority. It called for a maximum bond issue of \$50 million to provide "highways connecting at least the various county seats of the State."

The state also has a variety of road user taxes specifically dedicated to financing this highway system. The best known is on each gallon of gasoline, but there are also various fees charged to motorists for their drivers' license, their title when purchasing a vehicle and the annual license plate renewals.

The advent of the interstate highway system provided 90 percent federal money to pay the lion's share of these new roads in every state including West Virginia. And the subsequent Appalachian Developmental Highways system was a 70-30 federal-state matching program. But now this state's system of roads that exceeds 36,000 miles has high-cost maintenance needs, and current road user tax revenues are not sufficient to do the job.

At the 2011 legislative session, the Legislature passed a bill to increase license plate fees and other road user taxes by about \$40 million annually, but Gov. Earl Ray Tomblin, running for election to the unexpired term as chief executive, quickly vetoed it to gain favor with voters.

Now eight of the 34 members of the State Senate have introduced a proposed amendment to the state constitution to let voters decide whether they want to authorize a \$1.5 billion bond issue to provide money for state highway maintenance and construction. But even those sponsors, including Senate President Jeff Kessler, D-Marshall, Majority Leader John Unger, D-Berkeley, and Minority Leader Mike Hall, R-Putnam, clearly are not pushing the idea this election year.

Senate Joint Resolution 11 has been referred to the Senate Judiciary Committee, where Chairman Corey Palumbo, D-Kanawha, says no one has asked him to put this issue on the committee agenda. And Sen. Robert Beach, D-Monongalia, the lead sponsor, admits he didn't expect the proposal to be considered this year but that he merely wants to start a dialogue about

the issue.

Delegate Barbara Fleischauer, D-Monongalia, said she hopes as chair of the House Constitutional Revision Committee to schedule a public hearing on the issue the final week of this legislative session that might keep the idea alive for next year. Certainly the funding needs in the state's highway system won't disappear.

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Many times a bill is introduced at the Legislature by sponsors who realize it has no hope of passage. But it can nevertheless convey a message, and HB4562 is clearly one in that category.

The sponsors are three minority Republicans with little clout even in their own party. But Delegates Eric Householder, R-Berkeley, Marty Gearheart, R-Mercer, and Jonathan Miller, R-Berkeley, claim their bill dubbed the "Tea Party Act" is an effort to point out their claim that "state government wastes at least 10 percent of the taxpayers' money every year."

The bill calls for cuts in state spending of \$1 billion over the next five years, which is as you might guess, would be equal to 10 percent of the annual state general operating budget. This \$200 million of state tax revenues that would not be spent each of the next five years is to be deposited in a Tax Relief Account and used to reduce current taxes on West Virginia residents.

There is, of course, no way this bill will ever emerge from committee for an actual showdown on the House floor. It's simply a way for this trio to make a point.

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Confirmation that the current legislative session is on the right track with its efforts to confront the problem of overcrowded state prisons and regional jails came in a report last week from the West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy that echoes the need for alternative sentencing options.

The report revealed that West Virginia spent a greater share of its general tax revenues on corrections than all but one other state -- Wisconsin -- during the past 20 years. It is a statistic that should give new emphasis to the various efforts to provide transitional housing for prisoners being released early and to provide for early paroles and release of non-violent prison inmates.

*Tom Miller is a retired state government reporter for The Herald-Dispatch. He is a regular contributor to The Herald-Dispatch opinion page.*

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**RedNeck1**

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" But now this state's system of roads that exceeds 36,000 miles has high-cost maintenance needs, and current road user tax revenues are not sufficient to do the job."

Yes, we have more roads than we can afford and the cost of maintenance is never included when a new road is proposed.

Add to that all the roads the State adopts whenever a "developer" abandons a subdivision's private road or a city/village decides it can no longer pay to pave their road(s). ... [\[more\]](#)

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**rmweld**  
Registered User  
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Redneck---You made some REAL good points. Now,I'll add two more---It's election year and Tomblin wants back in office and people such as myself would like an accounting on the tax on gas and where the Toll on the turnpike money is actually going ---The taxpayers need to know.