

Opinion Exchange

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Want heavier trucks? Fully fund highways

- Pawlenty transportation system won't support behemoths.

Business interests are back in St. Paul this year arguing in support of a Pawlenty administration proposal to allow heavier trucks on Minnesota highways. The Legislature's answer should be simple and direct: Put your proposal away until Minnesota's highways and bridges are fully, adequately funded to handle existing commercial traffic.

Minnesota currently restricts most truck weights to 80,000 pounds (the same as the federal limit on freeways), and Gov. Tim Pawlenty's administration proposes raising that to 100,000 pounds. Opponents (including railroads, naturally) argue against the change, citing worries about road wear and tear, and the safety risks that heavier vehicles would entail.

There are economic benefits that would accrue from allowing the heavier vehicles, however, and the concerns could be answered — were Minnesota's roads, and especially its bridges, in top shape. The critical factor for road wear, for example, isn't the overall weight of a truck, but the number of axles on which that weight is distributed, provided that roads and bridges are in good shape.

The problem is that Minnesota's roads and bridges are in deplorable shape, and the same administration that is proposing heavier trucks is determined to keep them that way — by pledging to veto the Legislature's 10-cent gas-tax increase, the first for Minnesota since 1988, and half-cent metro

sales tax for transit. Many of the same business interests that would benefit from a higher weight limit have aligned themselves with the governor. Week in and week out, they heap abuse and scorn on the DFL majorities in the Legislature that seek to do the right thing by the transportation system so critical to Minnesota's economy.

Putting heavier commercial vehicles on Minnesota's congested, undermaintained highways and bridges makes no sense at all. It would indeed invite all the bad consequences that worry opponents of the bill.

Supporters of the legislation cite Rep. James Oberstar's chairmanship of the House Transportation Committee and argue that if Minnesota allows heavier trucks, Oberstar might move to also allow heavier loads on federal freeways. Maybe he would, but there is no maybe at all about Oberstar's remarkable appearance at the Capitol on Feb. 20. He had a clear message for the Legislature: Raise the Minnesota gas tax to avoid missing out on millions in federal matching funds. "If you do the right thing, people will understand; they will support you," he said.

Oberstar was right; raising the gas tax is doing the right thing. In the case of allowing heavier trucks on state roadways, it is also the necessary thing. Until the state can find the will to raise the revenue that a modern transportation system requires, the Legislature can't justify allowing those heavier trucks.