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Dayton explains his position on gas tax hike

April 10, 2013

By Josh Moniz - Staff Writer , The Journal

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MANKATO Gas tax hikes, Highway 14 and Local Government Aid reform were topics at Gov. Mark Dayton's town hall meeting on Tuesday evening in North Mankato.

In presenting his 'Budget for a Better Minnesota' to a crowd of approximately 200, Dayton reiterated his resolve to pass main points of the budget. Those proposals include raising income tax on Minnesota's top 2 percent of wage earners and increasing education funding.

Gas Tax

A gas tax hike to fund Minnesota's transportation system and unaddressed projects like Highway 14's four-lane expansion received much attention.

On Monday, Dayton repeated his stance that he did not favor a gas tax hike because public support is lacking.

After that statement by Dayton, the House and Senate Transportation Finance chairs pulled their planned unveiling of transportation omnibus bills, which included a 5-cent gas tax hike to fund "corridor of commerce" projects like Highway 14. However, the chairs indicated they plan to present an omnibus bill on Thursday.

At Tuesday's meeting, Dayton said the Minneapolis-based chairs did comprehensive work on the metro side of the bills, but failed to "crunch the numbers on the outstate" portions. He said the bills lacked the research needed to make sure those parts passed.

Dayton is planning a six-month state tour starting in late summer with the MnDOT commissioner and legislators. He wants to hear what alternative funding sources for transportation could gain statewide support. He envisions a process similar to the approval of the Legacy Act sales tax, which easily passed because of strong support despite dislike for sale taxes.

Dayton expressed concern that using short-sighted solutions like the gas tax and mistakes by MnDOT that "defy common sense" would turn public support against better solutions presented later. He does not want the public believing increased transportation plans only lead to things getting worse. As an example, he pointed to the barriers MnDOT placed between Highway 14's two lanes of traffic from North Mankato to Nicollet, because they can prohibit emergency vehicles from being able to pass.

Dayton asked for a show of hands of how many people supported the gas tax hike. A large majority of the 200 people in attendance raised their hands. In response, he said the problem is that the rest of the state lacks the same level of support for the proposal. He wants a new, comprehensive funding package that will solve transportation funding for the long term.

"Then, we'll have enough funds to just pick projects like Highway 14 and finish them," said Dayton, "We'll be able to finish Highway

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14 in three years instead of piecemeal over 30 years."

The proposed tour would start at the end of this summer, after this year's legislative session.

LGA reform

Dayton supports the proposed bill to simplify and reform the formula for Local Government Aid funding. The new formula was developed by a coalition of organizations representing Greater Minnesota cities and metro cities. Dayton joked their cooperation was treated like "a miracle in the Capitol."

Dayton's original proposal raised the total LGA funding by \$80 million, but the current bill only raises it by \$60 million. Rural cities have expressed concern because they had agreed to a formula that gave them a boost in LGA funding in the immediate term to compensate for less over the long term. Dayton said he will support the reduced amount over nothing, but he would prefer a \$80 million funding level.

The proposed bill pleased many Minnesota cities, with several cities passing resolutions in support of the reform. The bill is currently pending a hearing in the Minnesota House Tax committee.

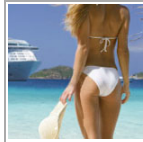
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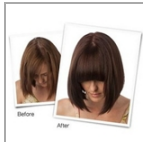
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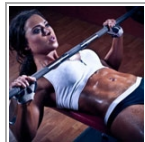
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