

Panel Backs Local Gas Tax, Vehicle Fees

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Owning a car and filling it with gas in Montgomery County could become more costly if a proposal floated yesterday at a County Council committee meeting gains support.

The council's fiscal policy committee backed a plan to seek permission from the General Assembly for a county tax on gasoline. Members said they also would consider seeking permission to impose a local fee on vehicle registrations and titles. All would piggyback on state levies, and the revenue would go to pay for such projects as road improvements.

Montgomery would be the only jurisdiction in the state to collect a gas tax or the two vehicle fees. The county could raise \$75 million a year with a 15-cent-a-gallon tax, a county study estimated. The study recommended that the money be used for existing infrastructure needs, not to plug a projected \$400 million budget shortfall.

Previous discussions of a county gas tax and a local vehicle registration fee have never gained traction, and there was no attempt to increase the statewide gas tax during the General Assembly's recent special session.

Last month, the council approved increases in the recordation tax and impact taxes on new construction to help pay for roads, schools and other needs. But that won't address immediate problems, said council member Nancy Floreen (D-At



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Duchy Trachtenberg chairs the council panel that supports new local gas and vehicle levies.

Large), who pushed for the study. "We need to fill the needs of people who are here today," she said.

Two members of the fiscal policy committee, Duchy Trachtenberg (D-At Large), who chairs the panel, and Roger Berliner (D-Potomac-Bethesda) supported seeking permission for the new and fees. The third member, Marilyn Praisner (D-Eastern County), is recovering from a car accident and was absent.

The proposed tax drew an immediate negative reaction from Michael Smith, who owns three service stations in Montgomery. He said that a local tax would hurt business and that he already pays more than station owners elsewhere because of the industry's pricing system.

"People are so price-conscious that adding any kind of tax, people are going to notice it," he said.