

By JOHN K. WILEY THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

## INITIATIVE 912



Cars and trucks line up on Rudkin Road to get through the Valley Mall Boulevard intersection on Saturday. A \$27 million plan to fix the intersection would be put on hold if voters approve Initiative 912.

# Who gets the gas tax money ?

*You may be surprised: Most of Eastern Washington gets back more than it pays from taxes at the pump*

SPOKANE - In Eastern Washington, with its many miles of lonely highways to the outside world, voters have a Solomon-like decision to make about the state's new phased 9.5-cent-a-gallon gas tax. Do they vote to keep the state's ambitious transportation package, with its billions of dollars destined for Puget Sound mega projects, and get a little something in return? Or do they vote against it – approve Initiative 912 - and face the prospect of getting far less in the future?

Transportation experts say that for the most part, Eastern Washington counties have traditionally gotten back more from state and federal gas tax revenues than their residents pay at the pump. They say improvements to Puget Sound roads make it easier to get Eastern Washington produce and products to markets and ports west of the Cascades. They warn that passage of Initiative 912, which would roll back the 9.5 cent-a-gallon gas tax approved by the Legislature, will lead to polarization of interests and less money going to transportation im-

provements east of the Cascades.

Ken Casavant, a Washington State University agricultural economics professor who specializes in transportation issues, said Eastern Washington politicians who demand dollar-for-dollar transportation funding are being shortsighted. Semitrailers and trains filled with fruits, vegetables, grain, forest products - all heavily tied to international trade - each day head west over Snoqualmie and Stevens passes to Puget Sound, he said.

An estimated 250 of the 750 long-haul truck trips that originate each day in Washington are trucks from Eastern Washington headed for west side ports, mainly Tacoma and Seattle, Casavant found as part of a recent transportation study. "Just because something is done on the west side of the state to improve roads to ports and other facilities doesn't mean we don't benefit," Casavant said in a recent interview.

Projects to lessen congestion in the crowded Interstate 5 corridor and improve Snoqualmie Pass on I-90 mean it will take less time to get products from the east side to the west side of the state, he said. "Eastern Washington sends its products to Puget Sound ports," he said. "Anything that causes logistical problems over there decreases our competitive advantage in international markets."

Dave Overstreet, a spokesman for the American Automobile Association's Washington-Inland chapter, said his traffic safety organization believes improved roads benefit everyone in the state. "Generally, AAA believes we need to invest in our transportation infrastructure in the state," he said. "From our perspective, we have to look at the state as a whole and ask, 'Is this a benefit?' The answer is 'yes.'"

Should I-912 pass, there is no backup plan and the Legislature likely would be unwilling to address transportation problems again for years, Overstreet and Casavant said. "One of the veiled warnings that came from legislative leaders was, if I-912 passes and you roll back the gas tax, there are going to be more attempts toward regional transportation funding," Overstreet said. "Money raised in the Seattle area would stay in the Seattle area."

Department of Transportation statistics show that the majority of Eastern Washington counties have gotten back more than \$1 for every \$1 residents paid in state and local gas taxes between 1944-2003. That will shift somewhat over the next 10 years, with more Eastern Washington counties becoming net gas tax contributors, but overall, transportation projects are evenly distributed regionally, said Al Gilson, a spokesman for the Department of Transportation in Spokane.

Gilson notes that one of the major projects from the new gas tax is the widening and safety improvements to Interstate 90 at Snoqualmie Pass across the Cascades. Should an earthquake topple the Alaskan Way Viaduct in Seattle, its replacement would be paid for by the entire state, Casavant said. If I-912 passes, Eastern Washington transportation projects would be on the chopping block.

"If the gas tax fails, with no substitute package in place, you would see the Puget Sound and some strong growth areas funding themselves, with sales taxes and tolls," Casavant said.

"There would be little or no activity here in the rural areas."