

## Tax Those Gas Guzzlers, Don't Nag the Rest of Us

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### **Article:**

I was struck by the resigned mood of the N&R's Oct. 5 editorial ("Will It Take Gas Lines to Remind Us to Conserve?"), which bemoaned the fact that people don't buy fuel-efficient cars any more. If we really want to encourage conservation, there's a sure-fire solution: raise gasoline taxes.

That's right. Raise them.

As any beginning economics student can tell you, when the price of something goes up, people want to buy less. Gasoline consumption is higher now than in the past precisely because gas is cheaper once you account for inflation.

A gas tax would be highly unpopular, at least in the beginning, but it would work. And it would be superior to having to listen to public nannies nag us about the cars we drive and the gas we use.

Given the price of gasoline and the relative safety and convenience of alternative models, the American public currently makes sound car-buying decisions. We discount such decisions at our peril, both morally and practically.

And yet the federal government's fuel-efficiency standards do just that, forcing automakers to discontinue some models in order to meet standards.

If the price of gasoline were higher, people would have the information they need to make even better decisions about what to drive. Someone who really wanted a gas-guzzler could get one, but he or she would have to pay for the gas guzzled. If a fuel-inefficient model were taken off the market, it would be because not enough people wanted to buy it, not because the maker is trying to comply narrowly with regulations.

We could avoid hurting the working poor in a public transportation-poor state like North Carolina by offsetting higher gas taxes with needs-based tax rebates. But the working poor would be facing the same incentives as everyone else. The revenues from increased gas taxes could be used to address the problems our car culture has created, from air pollution to urban sprawl to foreign energy dependence.

The people who cause more of the problems—the gas-guzzlers—would pay more for the solutions, and doesn't that make sense?