

# Carolina Review

Governor Hunt announced last week that he would not make a decision on whether to push for increased gasoline taxes at least until the spring - in March or April.

Press spokesman, Brent Hackney, said that the decision not to decide was based on "a number of sound reasons." Those reasons included the need for a period of public comment and personal time for the governor to assess the report.

"The governor needs time to find out for himself what really needs to be done - he appointed the Commission to assist him but he is not bound by the findings of that Commission," Hackney said.

Left unsaid was the fact that the governor's decision might be based on some very real political considerations. "The suggestion of a gasoline tax increase at this time would be welcomed like a bad toothache," said one Hunt supporter.

Most observers believe that by waiting, Hunt will have more time to sell his gasoline tax proposals to the public. By spring, the possibility exists, too, that the taxpayer's own economic picture will have brightened. And in four months, Hunt will have had time to feel out the ongoing budget process in the 1961 General Assembly.

Of course, the legislators will have had much less time to bandy about any Hunt proposals.

According to Hackney, the waiting also allows time to study any other proposals that might surface - possibly from the legislators.

At one time during the past campaign, Lt. Gov. Jimmy Green suggested that extra sources of highway revenue might come from shifting the sales tax on automotive accessories (batteries, tires, etc.) from the general fund to the highway fund.

In addition, there are other proposals that the money be transferred directly from the general fund.

"The governor has an open mind to that (general fund highway spending). But he knows that if you go into the general fund, then highways become 'prioritized' with education and social programs," said Hackney. "Do you want to add that into the mix?"

"The truth is," Hackney said, "most people assume the governor has decided in favor of the tax, but that just isn't true. Even in his own mind, he is not committed."

No doubt what Hackney says is true. But most observers feel Hunt's announcement last week was just a delay in what eventually will be his Administration's support of a substantial gasoline tax increase unless the opposition over the next four months is absolutely ex-cruciating.

Certainly the move won't be popular in the General Assembly or anywhere else for that matter. But then, Gov. Hunt has in the past been very successful by flying against the winds of acceptable political opinion and by facing the "tough choices."

The speculation for the increase was started a couple of years ago when Secretary of Transportation Tom Bradshaw (a Hunt appointee) suggested that his department needed, maybe from the general fund, an additional \$38-million for highway maintenance.

Expenditures for the 75,000 plus miles of roads in North Carolina come only from motor fuel tax revenues, a 2 per cent sales tax (up to \$120) on new cars, driver's license fees, and license plate fees for cars and trucks.

Bradshaw did not get the extra money and his suggestion was quickly squelched. His argument, however, was valid - that the higher cost of gasoline and more fuel efficient cars

was causing a drastic drop in gasoline tax revenues (currently a \$19-million shortfall).

Gov. Hunt responded by appointing a "Blue Ribbon" Highway Commission to study the needs of North Carolina highways in the future. That Commission Report, recently released, has called for substantial increases in highway tax fund formulas.

From Bradshaw's meager \$38-million a couple of years ago - the Commission has suggested increases that would generate up to and above \$900-million in additional revenue over the next four years.

Opponents of the Commission Report suggest that something has gone astray. One government source, who preferred to remain unidentified, explained what some feel might have happened.

According to him, the Blue Ribbon Commission, when it was appointed, "was strictly a 'committee of intimidation.' It came out in the early primary season and had every big wig that's ever been around as a member - including a former governor to chair it (Justice Dan Moore). At that time, Hunt had to contend with Scott," the source said.

"You know when you appoint a committee like that, someday they are going to come back and report - then they have to justify their existence and show how hard they worked," the source surmised.

## Vets Reminded To Recompute Yearly Income

The Veterans Administration has issued its annual reminder that it's time for VA pensioners to recompute their income for the year to determine whether it meets agency requirements.

The reminders were in the form of notices sent with November pension checks, according to VA Regional Director, Kenneth E. McDonald.

Nationwide, about 620,000 veterans age 72 and older who receive VA pensions under laws that were in effect prior to December 31, 1978, got the notices.

McDonald said this group of veterans did not elect to transfer to the new "improved" pension plan that went into operation two years ago. This plan provides higher rates of benefits but also counts certain income in computing pension eligibility that isn't considered under the "old" pension plan.

The fact that they did not convert their pensions to the "improved" plan does not exempt them from the basic income limits of the law, McDonald said.

They must still report any changes in the number of status of their dependents and any income increase which brings them over the limits.

They do not, however, have to report general rate increases in social security benefits because VA automatically records them.

Pensions are paid to wartime veterans with non-service connected disabilities who meet income limitations, and to their eligible widows and children.

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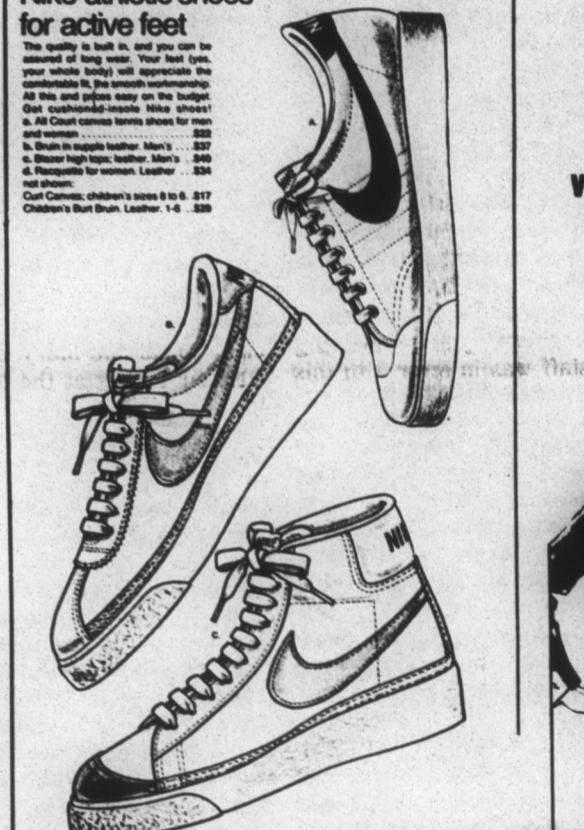
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