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Toll Tale

Has the Taxpayers Association found common ground with environmentalists?

by [Katharine Biele](#)

Bob Marley weighed in on the Utah Taxpayers Association blog recently. Simply put, he said, "I'm a living man; I've got work to do; If you're not happy, then you must be blue."

It's hard to argue with that, especially considering the subject of the blog—transportation policy. Specifically, the discussion was about congestion pricing, which has nothing to do with stuffy noses but much to do with bad air.

And the air piece has helped to bring the conservative, business-oriented Taxpayers Association into a cozy little coalition with environmentalists, poverty advocates and a blogger famously named Marley, if you can picture this.

Here's the basic premise: By placing tolls on roads at peak hours, you will be bringing in money to pay for those roads while encouraging commuters to change their driving habits. In other words, you pay the highest tolls during the 25 highest traffic hours each week unless you drive in the off-hours or telecommute. Ultimately, you'll so hate toll roads that you'll just move closer to work. And then we'll have walkable communities, clean air, peace and love.

"People who oppose this are quietly saying we should raise the sales tax," says Mike Jerman of the Utah Taxpayers Association. In fact, "Sen. Ed Mayne, D-West Valley City, has proposed raising the statewide sales-tax rate by one full percentage point," the Taxpayers Association's Website states. For FY 2008, that would generate \$500 million—to expand the transportation infrastructure.

Expanding the infrastructure is a whole different problem—at least, a whole different political problem. Take, for example, an odd little bill to fold the Utah Transit Authority into the Utah Department of Transportation. That would put the responsibility for mass transit in the hands of an agency that not only knows nothing about mass transit but also has a stake in thwarting it.

The motives behind that bill—HB166—are murky at best but may have roots in an effort by petroleum companies and auto manufacturers in the 1930s to wipe out mass transit, says Robert Huefner, professor of political science at the University of Utah.

Now comes the Utah Taxpayers Association trying to cut through the murk and expose what Jerman calls a dirty little secret of Utah government.

“The growth rate of our general fund revenue has been grossly underestimated,” he says. That’s because, like a Pac-Man, transportation has been gobbling up consistently larger shares of earmarked general-sales-tax revenues. And those earmarked funds are not reflected in the state’s “budget” documents because they’re, duh, earmarked, so why bother?

“In Gov. Huntsman’s FY ’08 budget proposal, \$716 million in unrestricted and earmarked general-fund dollars will be spent on state and local roads,” the Website notes.

At the same time, education’s share of general fund dollars has been decreasing.

“Since 1990, Utah’s state expenditures have changed significantly. . . . State spending has shifted from K-12 and higher education to transportation and, to a smaller degree, corrections and health,” the Taxpayers Association states. It’s all part of a big highway-improvement push that began during those 10 years before the 2002 Olympics and is still rolling.

Of course, in a huge state budget of \$10.7 billion, what’s a few hundred million here and there? Certainly, to K-12—with the lowest per-pupil spending in the nation—every penny counts.

Since 1990, here’s how the budget shares have changed, according to the Utah Taxpayers Association:

- K-12 has decreased from 47.8 percent to 42.2 percent
- * Higher-ed operations, down from 18 percent to 13.4 percent
- * Transportation, up from 0.1 percent to 12.1 percent.

You might guess that the Truckers Association has come out in force against toll roads, calling it a double tax because drivers already pay at the pump. But the gas tax actually hasn’t increased in years and, again, is earmarked so it flows directly to roads. Huefner doesn’t mind the “congestion pricing” solution, although he thinks there ought to be more. “It’s appropriate to shift more of the cost to the user; these are the right kinds of arguments,” he says. “But they’re looking at the cost of building roads and I’m looking at the cost of pollution and dependence on foreign oil.”

So he’d like to see some combination of higher gas taxes and toll roads. There also should be some kind of study of “contributors”—what kind of vehicles are using the roads more—since there hasn’t been one in decades.

The momentum in this year's legislative session appears to be toward transportation, as you could probably guess from the Utah Education Association's mantra, "Fund Schools, Not Roads." But a big gorilla like the Utah Taxpayers Association could help deflate this peculiar adulation of asphalt.

The Sierra Club likes the environmental aspect of curbing commuters, and poverty advocates like Crossroads Urban Center like the change of focus.

"It's dangerous to earmark," says Linda Hilton of Crossroads. "It takes money from Health and Human Services, from housing and public safety. And what happens in time of crisis when we can't release those funds?"

She can rest assured that the roads, at least, will be safely paved for a quick exit.