

Governor Janet Mills not abandoning regional gas tax despite 86% public opposition in stakeholder feedback

by Maine Examiner 01/18/2020 | Posted in Blaine House, Maine News, News, State House



Governor Janet Mills speaks at a press conference flanked by Senate President Troy Jackson, House Speaker Sara Gideon, DHHS Commissioner Jeanne Lambrew and Rep. Denise Tepler

[Click here to view online.](#)

AUGUSTA – In the month since the architects of the Transportation and Climate Initiative rolled out their draft MOU and estimates that the agreement would add a 17-cent per gallon tax on a gallon of gasoline, comments from Maine people have rolled in. Those comments, accepted through the TCI online stakeholder input form, are overwhelmingly opposed to Maine joining the agreement.

A review of more than 800 official public comments on the TCI website since December 17th shows that more than 86% of the comments from Maine are in opposition to Governor Janet Mills entering Maine into the agreement. About 10% of comments are in support and a little over 3% are neutral.

The Transportation and Climate Initiative began as a compact of twelve states and Washington D.C. that would craft an agreement to, ostensibly, reduce carbon emissions from transportation on the east coast of the United States. The draft framework TCI released in December showed that the coalition proposed doing that with a tax on fossil fuels that would roughly equate to a 17-cent per gallon tax on gasoline in the initial implementation. It would rise from there as the TCI ratchets up pressure to further choke off emissions.

The coalition would then distribute the funds for “green” transportation projects, likely in areas with dense population centers.

For Mainers, that looks a lot like rural Mainers getting hit with a big tax increase to provide funding for more urban southern Maine – something that benefits rural Maine very little.

Since the framework that put the 17-cent per gallon increase in black and white was released, the Governor's of Connecticut and New Hampshire have said they would withdraw from the TCI compact. Vermont's Governor Phil Scott has also signaled he is not in favor.

Governor Janet Mills previously called opponents of the gas tax “trolls” when asked about people posting their opposition online by Maine Public. In a recent interview on WGAN, Governor Mills said she had talked to Governor Charlie Baker a couple times and that he is “very gung-ho” and a big proponent of TCI. However, Mills said she was going to monitor it because she’s “not clear how it would pan out.” Mills also signaled she was not sure of the process the TCI had laid out and that she was not in favor of a framework that passed the tax along from the source of the gasoline to end-consumers. It’s unclear how that could be changed.

Governor Mills then transitioned to the state’s “Blue Ribbon Commission” on transportation funding. That commission, as Maine Examiner has reported, is looking at several different ideas that could lead to higher costs for Maine drivers, including expanding toll booths across Maine, raising the state gas tax or both, as one member of the commission has said.

Mills said she hopes the commission will “put their nose to the grindstone to come up with some long term planning” for transportation funding.

When asked a follow up question by host Matthew Gagnon about whether the state would be required to pass legislation entering into the TCI, Governor Mills said it was too early to say.

Raising the gas tax or borrowing money to repair Maine’s roads and bridges has been a point of debate in recent months. After Governor Mills’ first two-year state budget raised spending by more than 10% without providing any additional funding for transportation needs, the push has been on from the political left in Augusta to raise the gas tax or incur heavy borrowing for transportation.

Republicans have argued that transportation should be prioritized in the state budget. They point to existing money from transportation related sales tax as a simple solution to provide adequate funding for Maine roads, and are critical of Democrats for not prioritizing transportation funding, then pivoting to taxes or borrowing to make up the difference.

Some of the comments from Mainers show strong opposition.

“I do not support this new gas tax. It will in no way make a difference in the carbon footprint. All it will do is hurt the middle-class working people of the State of Maine. All it will do is drive the prices of other goods up higher than they already are. Maine is in the top 10 in the nation of states with the highest taxes. Is Janet shooting to be number 1???” said David Cahoon of Wells, Maine.

Janet Mitchell of Dedham expressed concern that the TCI will hurt lower-income Mainers the most, “I do not support participation in TCI. Maine is a rural state and has many lower income earners that can not afford an increase to the cost of transportation. The proposed gas taxes or fees would not benefit those in rural Maine and would cause a hardship for minimal gain. I am 100% against TCI and feel Maine needs to focus on our budget and our people.”

But others, such as Steve Robey of Vinalhaven expressed support while criticizing the federal government, “I really believe we need to reduce pollution from transportation. I request that maine formally join the plan to reduce emissions. Please ensure that the policy includes strong component of equity by prioritizing clean investments in areas overburdened by pollution and/or for those who don’t have access. I appreciate the bipartisan nature of this project, moving us forward while the federal government takes us backward.”

The Transportation and Climate Initiative will continue accepting public comments through February 28th, 2020. They expect to produce a final Memorandum of Understanding in the spring of 2020. You can submit public comment at the link below:

<https://www.transportationandclimate.org/main-menu/tci-regional-policy-design-stakeholder-input-form>