

Title: **Ga., SC sign new agreement for port**
 Author: By RUSS BYNUM The Associated Pres
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Ga., SC sign new agreement for port

By RUSS BYNUM

The Associated Pres

SAVANNAH — A proposed \$4.5 billion port terminal to be shared by Georgia and South Carolina came closer to reality Monday as the states' port officials signed a new deal for managing the project and voted to ask a federal agency for the permits required to start construction.

Governors of the neighboring states decided eight years ago to work together on developing the Jasper Ocean Terminal on the South Carolina side of the Savannah River. The plan calls for the states to jointly run a shipping terminal with space for up to 7 million cargo containers before growing business causes the ports of Savannah and Charleston to run out of room.

Georgia Gov. Nathan Deal said the new agreement will help ensure "that we not only grow today but that we continue to grow for

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PORT

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decades to come." And South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley hailed the deal as "an incredible opportunity to strengthen our ports system."

After years of studying — and sometimes debating — whether the massive project was feasible, port officials from both states have now agreed to spend the coming years working toward design-

ing and financing the shared terminal while the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers conducts the environmental studies required before construction can begin.

Paperwork asking the Corps' Charleston District to begin studies on the land construction should be submitted before Thanksgiving, said Doug Marchand, the

project's executive adviser. A similar packet seeking permits to widen and deepen the shipping channel is expected to be sent to the agency's Savannah District in early December.

The terminal would be built in Jasper County, S.C., across the river from Savannah. Environmental studies could take eight years, with

years of construction following. Consultants have said 2029 is the earliest they would expect to see completion of the project's first phase, which is expected to cost more than \$2 billion.

The new joint project agreement calls for Georgia and South Carolina to each shoulder half the Jasper terminal's costs.



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The states still need to decide how they would pay for it. Jeffrey Holt, a banker who specializes in financing for port expansions and other infrastructure projects, told the board over-seeing the Jasper County terminal Monday that for every \$1 billion borrowed, the states should expect to pay \$50 million to \$130 million each year to cover debt obligations.

Title: **Haley asks residents to assist with flood relief fund**
 Author: BY SEANNA ADCOX Associated Press
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Haley asks residents to assist with flood relief fund

BY SEANNA ADCOX
 Associated Press

COLUMBIA — Gov. Nikki Haley called on people across the nation Monday to contribute to the One SC relief fund to rebuild homes following last month's historic flooding, saying it can do what the government can't.

"While the debris has gone off the roads, if you took a right-hand turn into any of the neighborhoods ... all over the state, you will see devastation," Haley said in announcing the fund's creation. "If you are blessed and did not have damage to your home. If you are blessed and you had insurance. ... Pay it forward."

The early October storm that dumped 2 feet of rain in some parts of the state destroyed or damaged more than 38,000 homes. By definition, homes don't have even "minor damage" unless at least a foot of water was inside, according to the South Carolina Emergency Management Division.

Haley said all donations to One SC will go toward supplies for rebuilding efforts, since her nonprofit — the Original Six Foundation — is covering administrative costs. Priority for distributions will start with the elderly and those living in poverty, she said.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency has identified 5,000 needy families who are over age 65 and live on less than \$20,000 annually — with about 1,200 of those having immediate need, said retired Army Col. Kevin Shwedo, whom Haley appointed last month to coordinate relief efforts between government agencies and nonprofits.

"There's a small pool right now who are the most vulnerable that the volunteer organizations are focusing on," Shwedo said. But "they can't do anything without contributions coming from this organization."

Title: **SOME GAVE ALL**
 Author: BY MIDGE ROTHROCK
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SOME GAVE ALL

A salute to veterans

BY MIDGE ROTHROCK

November is the month we particularly honor and give thanks for the veterans of all branches and eras, willingly going where they are sent to serve so that the freedoms we enjoy are safely afforded us.

Men and women all over the globe endure conditions less than ideal to downright treacherous, understanding their very lives may become part of the ultimate sacrifice. Families are disrupted.

Please see **VETERANS**, Page 8

The final resting place of Sgt. 1st Class Anthony Venetz, at Arlington Cemetery.

VETERANS

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Tony Venetz and his wife Karen know the agony of receiving “that call”. In January, 2011, Tony’s son Anthony died in Afghanistan. It will soon be 5 years since his death, at just age 30. This brave Green Beret was born on October 28, 1980. Dad Tony, a veteran who served in active duty for 3-1/2 years in the Air Force, and another dozen years in the National Guard, comes from a long line of

men who served, including Tony’s father, two brothers, and now a newly-commissioned nephew.

To portray Anthony as that perfectly well behaved son would be stretching facts a bit. Anthony was the youngest of three, with two older sisters. His sisters, Erika and Andrea, both married, each have two children, and live with their husbands outside Baltimore. Anthony was married and had two children of his own, at the time of his death. Alexa Jade and Jace Anthony did not get the ben-

efit of knowing their dad on a daily basis throughout their growing years, since theirs was a young family when he died. He had been deployed multiple times, as a member of the Special Forces, taking him away from their home.

Growing up, Anthony was a bit of a “wild child”, by his father’s own admission. He and his buddies spent time with passports but without benefit of visas in Aruba after high school, until they were politely asked to leave. Being a great high school athlete in soccer

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got him into college in New York. But, doing his college studying was not on his agenda. He lived with Karen and Tony, still trying to find his niche' after the Aruba's adventures until he joined the Army. In 2000, his father offered three choices to this handsome, physically great specimen: he could go to school, get a job, or join the military. After this "good looking dude" did not excel at his job, veteran father Tony went with him to explore options with military recruiters. In typical Anthony fashion, he asked the Marine Corps recruiter what bonus they were offering; and upon finding it was none, chose the Army for the \$15,000 sign on bonus. He was slotted for Infantry. In just a year, he was made a sniper, training for Special Forces. In seven years, this good soldier was an E7, thriving in his career.

Before each deployment, Tony visited in person with his son, sending him off with respect and support. This father and son talked often on the phone, leaving their family to wonder what all they could possibly have to say in their long visits. July 4th, 2010, was the last time Tony saw his son alive, just before his final deployment.

Karen and Tony met when her boss, a friend of Tony's, suggested she consider a date with

his divorced friend. Not wanting to put her job in jeopardy (hardly!), she accepted. While filling the role of stepmother, Karen cherishes the memories of this remarkable boy who entered her life in his 8th year.

Anthony was larger than life throughout his 30 years. As an example, once he sang spontaneously from memory to Karen from "HMS Pinafore", when he found out they had taken in this musical. Another fun memory occurred when Anthony was young, and the three were at a shoe store. Karen's shoes she tried on did not fit: too big. "Don't worry," he said. "You will grow into them!"

When Anthony died, Tony and Karen went to meet the plane, coming in to Dover, Delaware, from Afghanistan. Karen especially was taken aback at the numerous newspaper articles, from Miami to Boston, honoring this military hero. Three different states flew flags over their state capitols as well. One of the first calls came from Governor Haley, received while they were heading to Dover. SC's Governor sought out their cell phone number and called to offer comfort and support. Her own husband has served in the Middle East, through his active role in the National Guard. In fact, Governor Haley called an additional two times, offering her services in whatever way this family might

find helpful, even providing her personal cell phone number. It was impressive.

The plane carrying this tall man of over 6' and 195 pounds only had this one body aboard, along with a General and military leaders. Anthony had received 2 bronze stars with valor, and 2 purple hearts, along with numerous other awards. There were three memorial services in his honor. One was in Afghanistan, one at Fort Bragg, and another which was the largest private funeral service since Vietnam era in Arlington. At this service, there was a long line of Green Berets, honoring their fallen comrade. At these memorial services, there is an ominous roll call where officers in the chain of the soldier's command respond. When the name of Anthony was called the required three times with no response, his stoic father finally broke down: a most difficult moment. The music from Anthony's own iPod was played at one of the receptions his father attended, where an open bar provided for military for four hours, with time to share many fond memories. Anthony had previously been wounded two times during his military service. He was treasured by his friends. One medic told Tony, "I'd go anywhere with your son". Late at night there was a knock at the hotel door in Crystal City. Seven men sat on the hall floor for hours with Tony, relating story after story about his son, evoking gales of laughter along with the tears. These guys told him, "You lost your son. We're all your sons now."

The sisters of this fallen hero get teased by their dad occasionally, as they recall his life so fondly. Dad asks, "When exactly did your brother become this saint?" These sisters have distinguished themselves as well. Sister Erika named her son Vincent Anthony, born before her own brother's death, and ironically on the same birthday in October. She is in the insurance industry, and also stages houses for her realtor husband. They have a daughter as well. Sister Andrea recently opened her own physical therapy center, and has a doctorate in PT. Her husband is 'a numbers guy', with a background in IT and Finance. They too have two children, giving Tony a total of six grandchildren ranging in age from 7 months to 12 years, including Anthony's two. This Italian family includes Tony's own mom, with the maiden name of Lombardi. Yes, she was indeed a cousin of Coach Vince, of Green Bay Packer fame.

The legacy for Anthony includes a baseball field on Long Island named "Sgt. 1st Class

Anthony Venetz's Baseball Field". There are three kids named after him as well. In Aiken, the Red Cross named him a Red Cross Hero, where he received a posthumous standing and sustained ovation.

At first, Anthony and Karen were involved with Wounded Warriors, which proved to be a bit too political for their tastes. They have

the highest respect for Fisher House, the military's version of Ronald McDonald's House, and a place where they stayed during this troublesome time. The Fisher House Foundation is well backed. Venetz family wished to do something where they could really make a difference. A sorority sister of one of Anthony's sisters named Abby was the first to see a wreath on Anthony's Arlington grave, placed there to remember and honor the fallen through "Wreaths Across America". She told the family, and they were moved as well as intrigued.

Wreaths Across America became their passion. This nonprofit organization places wreaths on the graves of fallen servicemen and women. Its mission is to remember the fallen; honor those who currently serve; and, teach our children the value of freedom. Tony's 'staff' consists of Karen and himself, and they are tireless. This year on December 12 at 11 a.m., Tony will join Raymond Clark of Southlawn Cemetery, 4524 Whiskey Road, where they are sponsoring the first Wreaths Across America Wreath-Laying Ceremony in our area. The public is strongly encouraged to come and be a part of this tribute. Among the attendees will be Senator Joe Wilson, as guest speaker. There will be a presentation of colors, playing of 'Taps', and a chance for each family with a veteran interred at Southlawn to place a wreath on their loved one's grave. Each branch will be recognized. This will coincide with the similar honor happening at Arlington Cemetery that day.

What has gone on in these recent years leading up to the December 12 event? What is the vision driving this devoted couple to put in countless hours for this purpose? Tony does not want his grandchildren to grow up and not feel proud to be an American. He wants them to remember Anthony Venetz and honor those who served. Tony speaks to groups with a passion about the strengths of this great nation, and his desire to expand the Wreaths Across America to every cemetery in the CSRA.

Two golf tournaments have been organized by Tony and Karen, both in retirement from their DC-area careers. Tony now works at Houndslake. Karen and he rounded up 30-

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40 sponsors, and had over 100 golfers in the inaugural tournament, with almost as many in the second one. Their fundraising efforts are supported by fine folks like Don Checks, Chairman of the Aiken County Red Cross Board as well as a tool and dye business owner. Pete Palmere, a Vietnam vet who manages Richland Self Storage, has also been a tremendous support. Debbie Rennew at Innovative Solutions, Jenny Johnson at Rogers Tires, Aiken's Newcomers Club and others have heard and responded. Clay Killian, County Administrator, is working with Tony to broaden the identify details for other area cemeteries. Tony has gone to the Aiken County Veteran's Council meeting to encourage their participation. VFW

Post #5877 is stepping up thus far. There are multiple veterans' groups in the CSRA. Tony wishes there was more collaboration. He would like to have a Patriot Guard of motorcyclists participate next December. Tony himself was part of 'Rolling Thunder' in his earlier days in DC. The monies raised at the golf tournament, donations and contributions through the jars placed throughout the area all go to support the wreaths. Tony and Karen handle raising the funds, getting the wreaths

shipped to the cemeteries from New England, providing the insurance, and locating volunteers to distribute the wreaths to the graves and pick them up too. With all of this done for the cemeteries, there is still not much interest and enthusiasm from these owners or the CSRA-area funeral directors for this National Wreath Day, held annually on the second Saturday of December by proclamation from Congress.

Your help is sought for getting the word out. This year, 600 wreaths will go to Arlington from the efforts of this Aiken couple. Fort Jackson has received wreaths from Venetz' efforts. Southlawn Cemetery on Whiskey Road will receive 300 wreaths in their ceremony. There are 65,000 living veterans in the CSRA, according to Tony. For a donation of \$15, a wreath can be purchased to honor those who have been willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for others. The Venetz couple will continue these efforts to a goal of having at least 100 wreaths go to Arlington, where one always rests on Anthony's grave, and to distribute in Aiken area enough to cover every one of our CSRA veterans.

Tony and Karen did their research and found Cedar Creek in Aiken, aided by realtor Delores Krenta's persistence. They are happy

with their choice of Aiken. Tony has worked in the Architectural Review Board and in finding candidates to nominate for roles in the Property Owners' Board. He plans to devote more time to ACTS and the VA too. He participated on November 7 at the Veterans' Walk at H. Odell Weeks Citizens' Park, and is interested in contributing where and when he can, with Wreaths taking a lion's share of their time.

Their beautiful home is graced in the front yard by a white crepe myrtle, honoring their son. Though damaged by the ice storm of last winter, their prized tree is being nursed back to health and appears to be regaining strength. Gary Frazier, now grounds superintendent of the Cedar Creek Golf Course, surprised this couple a few years back by delivering such a glorious tree which he located through his landscape work. An extensive home collection of limited edition pewter and western and military lithographs fill their lovely home, including sculptures by Andrew Chernak. Memorabilia from Anthony's career can be seen, including his treasured Green Beret, carefully displayed in a glass case.

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VETERANS

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Wouldn't it be a fitting tribute to have

wreaths across every veteran's resting place in the CSRA? The more cemeteries willing to participate, the more wreaths staying in this area. A donation of \$15 is all it takes to assure one more wreath for one more veteran.

Contact Tony and Karen at 803-648-5885 or email tonyv033@atlanticbb.net if you have an interest in helping with Wreaths Across America.

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Karen and Tony Venetz, raising funds and awareness for Wreaths Across America.

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Sgt. Anthony Venetz, Green Beret, The US Army.



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The three children of Tony Venetz, from left, are Erika, Anthony and Andrea.

Title: **Aiken GOP: No refugees in S.C.**
 Author: BY DAN BROWN dbrown@aikenstandard.com
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Aiken GOP: No refugees in S.C.

BY DAN BROWN

dbrown@aikenstandard.com

The head of the Aiken County Republican Party will introduce a resolution Tuesday night asking Aiken County Council to reject all potential United Nations resettlement funds designated for Syrian refugees to resettle in Aiken County.

The request follows Friday night's terrorist attacks in Paris that left more than 120 people dead and hundreds wounded.

The request arises out of the fear that because one of the suicide bombers in the Paris attacks reportedly entered Europe with Syrian refugees, others could, too.

President Barack Obama's administration has said it will take in 10,000 Syrian refugees within the next year.

"We're asking County Council in the resolution to reject all refugee funding for the Syrian refugees in the wake of the Paris attacks," said K.T. Ruthven, the chairman of the Aiken GOP.

"With the proximity of the Savannah River Site to Aiken, this becomes a matter of national security."

South Carolina Sen. Tom Young, R-Aiken, also joined the call in a letter sent to Gov. Nikki Haley on Monday urging her not to accept refugee funding to accept Syrians in the wake of the Paris attacks.

"My understanding is that there currently is not a way to adequately and to safely examine refugees coming to the United States and po-

tentially relocating in South Carolina," Young wrote. "I ask that you take this step to protect South Carolina and our citizens' safety in view of what we know at this time and in light of what happened in Paris this past Friday."

S.C. House Rep. Chris Corley, R-Graniteville, also issued his own letter to Haley, encouraging her to "take a stand against any Syrian refugees being placed in the state of South Carolina."

"As governor your first and most sacred duty

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INSIDE

Experts say states lack legal authority to block refugees, **9A**

REFUGEE

CONTINUED from 1A

is the safety of the citizens that you represent," Corley wrote. "There is no legitimate way to vet these refugees. A vast majority of these refugees are single men, and not women and children. We have already seen that terrorists have emerged from the ranks of these 'refugees' to lash out with violent and brutal consequences. Please govern with common sense and take a stand."

Governors across the United States also have verbally opposed bringing Syrian refugees into their states, but while Haley told the Associated Press on Monday

she's re-evaluating international refugee programs in light of recent events, she continues to support allowing the persecuted to come to South Carolina.

North Carolina Gov. Pat McCrory, Texas Gov. Greg Abbott and Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder, among others, have announced opposition to the movement of refugees into



Corley

their states, but Haley told the AP as long as nothing changes in who's being resettled in the state,

her stance on the matter won't change.

"Over the weekend, Michigan's governor suspended efforts to bring Syrian refugees to Michigan," Young wrote. "I expect other states to follow in the days ahead, and I urge you to protect South Carolina by moving swiftly to stop any more Syrian refugees from coming to our state in view of current circumstances."

In other business, Council will vote whether to approve a fee in lieu of tax in regard to a project known as Project Texas Wedge I.

Council will also vote on second reading whether to authorize a fee in lieu of tax and incentive agreement between Aiken County and AGY Aiken

LLC, formerly known as Project Sand, in addition to establishing a joint multicounty industrial park agreement between Aiken and Barnwell counties and AGY Aiken LLC.

Tuesday's Council meeting will be at 7 p.m. in Aiken County Government Center's Council Chambers, 1930 University Parkway.

Want to go?

WHAT: Council meeting

WHEN: 7 p.m. Tuesday

WHERE: Government Center, 1930 University Parkway

ONLINE

See Council's full agenda online at aikenstandard.com

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Young



AP PHOTO/MUHAMMED MUHEISEN, FILE

Syrian refugee Mahmoud Naoura, 30, center, chants "Thank God we are safe," while standing on a dinghy arriving from the Turkish coast to the northeastern Greek island of Lesbos.

Title: **Budget windfall could kill gas tax**
 Author: BY CASSIE COPE ccope@thestate.com
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FIXING YOUR ROADS

Budget windfall could kill gas tax

Extra \$1.2 billion in state budget – not higher taxes – should be spent on roads, some lawmakers argue

Long-term solution, not dependence on one-time surpluses, is answer, gas tax advocates say

Extra money in state budget shows S.C. can afford an income tax cut, Gov. Nikki Haley says

BY CASSIE COPE
ccope@thestate.com

Efforts to raise the state's gas tax to pay for road repairs suffered perhaps a fatal setback last week when South Carolina lawmakers found out they will have \$1.2 billion in added money to spend next year.

Momentum to raise the tax had been building since early October, when more than 2 feet of rain drenched portions of

the state, washing out and damaging 541 roads and bridges.

However, the \$1.2 billion added to the state's budget last week will fuel the arguments of conservative lawmakers who say the state's surpluses and growing revenues can pay for road repairs without a tax increase.

Advocates of a higher gas tax say it's

not realistic to put all \$1.2 billion toward

SEE ROADS, 15A

Fixing your roads

The final part of a four-part series

At thestate.com: See video of groups making their case for and against raising South Carolina's gas tax.

FROM PAGE 1A

ROADS

the cost of road repairs. Other causes – flood damage, rural schools, the funding needs of state agencies cut during the Great Recession – will lay claim to some of that money, they say. And, they add, a one-time \$1.2 billion windfall will not address the state's long-term road needs – estimated to cost up to an added \$1.5 billion a year for the next 30 years.

To get a long-term road repair solution, lawmakers will have to strike a deal on three issues – raising the state's gas tax, cutting its income tax rates and reforming the state Transportation Department.

"It's going to be difficult, but I don't think it's impossible," said state Sen. Shane Massey, R-

Edgefield. But to make a deal, a lot of lawmakers will have to move considerably in their positions on the three issues, he added.

Meanwhile, any deal might be delayed until after March 30, the deadline for challengers to file to run against sitting House and Senate members next fall.

HOW TO SPEND \$1.2 BILLION?

When senators return to Columbia in January, a proposed gas tax hike will be waiting for them.

"There's a plan still set for special order in the Senate, so we'll take that up," said Senate Majority Leader Harvey Peeler, R-Cherokee, adding, "I'm sure there will be tons of amend-

ments to it."

In an effort to block a vote, some senators could add up to 100 amendments to the proposal, said Senate President Pro Tempore Hugh Leatherman, R-Florence.

But, he added, the Senate needs to address the issue. "I want to work with our members to get a road funding package passed."

That state needs a recurring source of revenue to repair and improve its highway system, said Leatherman. "I'm not interested in going to the general fund," the state's \$7.7 billion operating budget.

But some conservative lawmakers – led by state Sen. Tom Davis, R-Beaufort – will want to

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do just that, using the added \$1.2 billion on road repairs.

Last spring, Davis filibustered a gas tax hike during the last three weeks of the legislative session, arguing lawmakers should spend the state's savings and surpluses on road repairs, not raise taxes. Davis' filibuster blocked senators from debating the roads bill. Instead, lawmakers agreed to send \$216.4 million in surplus money to counties for road repairs.

As floodwaters ravaged South Carolina last month, destroying roads and bridges, Davis said South Carolinians could see the need for more money for roads, hinting he could moderate his opposition to a gas tax hike. Now, however, after the floodwaters have receded, Davis wants to use the \$1.2 billion added last week to the state's budget for roads.

But other lawmakers say some of that added money will be needed to pay for flood damage and increase the budgets of state agencies, cut during the Great Recession and never restored.

State Sen. Joel Lourie, D-Richland, said more money for K-12 education, the Department of Social Services, higher education and vulnerable seniors will need to come from the added \$1.2 billion.

For example, there is a \$500 million deficit between the amount that legislators now are funding K-12 schools and the amount state law says those schools should get.

"It would be irresponsible to think that we could fund our roads problem with economic growth," Lourie said, adding roads projects need to be planned and paid for over years.

Republican Massey agreed. "It's important that you have a dependable and dedicated funding stream going to roads and bridges."

'STRENGTHENED PUSH FOR INCOME TAX RELIEF'

Lourie said the flooding that devastated parts of his Richland County district last month shows how important it is for the state to have solid infrastructure.

"Our roads and bridges were in poor shape to begin with and, now, many of them are even worse," he said.

But Republican Gov. Nikki Haley said Friday that paying flooding costs should be separated as an issue from finding a long-term road funding solution.

"The dangerous thing that can happen in government is when you start to combine one issue with the other," Haley said. "These are two separate issues and should be treated separately."

Last year, critics ripped Haley for combining two issues – saying she would approve a gas tax increase if legislators passed a larger income tax cut. In her State of the State address in January, Haley proposed cutting the state's top income tax rate to a 5 percent from 7 percent over a 10-year period.

Haley's proposal went nowhere.

But now, said Republican Massey, the added \$1.2 billion means "there will be a renewed and strengthened push for income tax relief" when senators debate how to raise money for roads.

After Haley's plan collapsed, Massey and Republican state senators introduced a plan to raise \$700 million a year for roads, largely by increasing the gas tax, and also cut income taxes by about \$700 million.

Republican senators hoped to win over Haley with their tax-cut proposal – reducing the highest income tax rate by 1 percentage point to 6 percent.

The Republican senators' plan was contingent on the state's general fund revenues growing by 1 percent a year before either the gas tax increases or income tax cuts would kick in. "We really were trying to do this in a

responsible manner so we're not going to put the state in jeopardy of financial problems," Massey said.

But Haley said Friday she is not willing to sign on to the Senate GOP plan. The Republican governor said she still wants a 2 percentage-point cut in the state's income taxes, adding the \$1.2 billion in added money means the state can afford it.

"I will stay at the 2 percent (age points) until they give me reason to go below that."

'REGIONALISM AND POLITICAL HORSE TRADING'

The Transportation Department says it needs an additional \$1.5 billion a year to repair, maintain and expand the state's highways. If lawmakers fully funded that request from the general fund it would eat up all of the added \$1.2 billion and then some.

Repairing, preserving and modernizing the existing roads system will cost an added \$1 billion a year, the agency says. That's do-able with the added \$1.2 billion – for one year. Where the money would come from in year 2 is unknown.

Some argue far less than \$1.5 billion a year is needed. They say if the structure of the Transportation Department – now governed by a legislatively controlled commission – is reformed, it would eliminate waste and political influence in how money is spent, saving money.

Haley advocated abolishing that commission in her January State of the State speech. Getting rid of the commission would make it "so the condition of South Carolina's roads is no longer driven by short-sighted regionalism and political horse trading, and we stop wasting our tax money," she said.

In their plans, Republicans, who control the House and Senate, propose giving the governor control of the Transportation Department, allowing the gover-

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nor to appoint all Transportation Department commissioners, who then would select an executive to head the roads agency.

That restructuring plan passed the House earlier this year as part of a proposal to increase gas taxes, raising \$427 million a year more for road repairs. But some Senate leaders vehemently oppose the restructuring.

FILING DEADLINE A FACTOR

One final factor will weigh into whether the Legislature passes a long-term roads plan next year – election-year politics.

The March 30 deadline to file to run for the House and Senate looms over senators and repre-

sentatives who are waiting to see if they will have primary challengers.

Tax increases never are popular, especially for Republicans, said Winthrop University political scientist Karen Kedrowski. “Republicans that support tax increases do face potential challengers from the right,” she said.

In South Carolina, where legislative districts are heavily gerrymandered so one party can dominate, many legislators fear most a challenge in their own party’s primary, she said.

Even if lawmakers see the need for a gas tax hike, they might not want to go out on a limb – and risk losing re-election

– until after March 30.

State Rep. Gary Simrill, a 12-term York Republican, said he never looks at filing deadlines to determine whether he acts on an issue. But some lawmakers do, he acknowledged.

Simrill, who supports increasing the gas tax, contends lawmakers could face more challengers if they do not pass a roads plan.

Voters want the state’s roads repaired, he said. “You’re elected to be a leader, and you’re elected to make things happen.”

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Behind-the-scenes players

Groups on both sides of the gas tax issue are pressuring lawmakers. A look at who they are:

AMERICANS FOR PROSPERITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA

The local chapter of the free-market advocacy group, tied to the billionaire political activist Koch brothers, opposes a gas tax increase. The group sent out mailings, robo-called S.C. citizens and held gas giveaways to get out its message against increasing the gas tax last session. “We are absolutely for

fixing our roads, but we want to see our transportation system reformed, made better,” said S.C. director Dave Schwartz.

S.C. ALLIANCE TO FIX OUR ROADS

The group is backed by local chambers of commerce, AAA Carolinas, AARP and the American Council of Engineering Companies of S.C. The state has not increased its gas tax for almost three decades, notes

executive director Bill Ross, adding, “Nobody wants to be living on what they were living on back in 1987.” Ross also notes if the gas tax is increased, 30 percent of the increased revenue would be paid by out-of-state drivers.

S.C. POLICY COUNCIL

The limited government think tank opposes a gas tax increase. Executive

director Ashley Landess says there is no plan on how to fix the state’s roads, only to raise taxes. S.C. roads are in deplorable condition, largely because most state money has been directed toward new road construction, Landess said. “The money that they’re getting now is not being directed toward fixing our roads.”

Where do South Carolinians stand on a gas tax hike?

The Winthrop Poll asked 1,109 South Carolinians in March if they would support raising the state’s gas tax by 10 cents a gallon if the added money went to pay for roads and bridges, and gas in South Carolina remained cheaper than North Carolina and Georgia.

55 PERCENT
support the gas tax hike

42 PERCENT
oppose the gas tax hike

3 PERCENT
were either not sure or refused to answer

SOURCE: Winthrop Poll

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After her State of the State address in January, Gov. Nikki Haley was criticized for linking an increase in the gas tax to fund road repairs with a reduction in South Carolina's top income tax rate.