

THE BUFFALO NEWS

High-speed toll lanes are part of Thruway's rate hike proposal

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What's next?

Several steps remain in the plan to upgrade the state Thruway:

- Public hearings planned for spring.
- Thruway Authority to vote in April.
- Toll hikes would go into effect May 1.
- Planned relocation of Williamsville toll booths by 2008.



Robert Kirkham/Buffalo News

ALBANY - High-speed lanes that will allow drivers to whisk through the Williamsville toll barrier, one of the region's worst bottlenecks, are among the plans given preliminary approval Thursday by the state Thruway Authority's board.

The new lanes are part of a proposal to raise tolls by 25 percent for passenger cars beginning May 1. The work, allowing E-ZPass holders to go through special lanes at "highway speed," would be done in conjunction with relocating the Williamsville barrier sometime in 2008 at a cost of \$60 million.

Thruway officials, trying to sell the toll hike, also held out hope that two toll barriers heading into Buffalo - which critics say impose a backdoor commuter tax unlike any other in the state - could be removed in the years ahead. For now, they are proposing a commuter discount - available only to E-ZPass drivers who go through the tolls 20 times a month - that would keep the current 50-

cent, one-way fee and exempt such drivers from the rate hike.

The Thruway board expects to give final approval to the toll hike in April after a series of public hearings. The board insisted the increase, the first since 1988, is needed to help pay for a massive, six-year \$2 billion construction program to renovate and bring new technology to the 641-mile highway system.

"It's time we made the hard decision and move this process forward," Thruway board member Nancy Carey said of the agency's need to get more money to fund what officials say are crucial upgrades to the nation's longest toll highway system.

The toll hike would bring the total amount collected in tolls from a projected \$440 million this year to \$608 million by 2006.

Thruway officials laid out an ambitious construction schedule that includes improvements to more than 500 miles of road, 220 bridges and the expansion of new fast lanes for E-ZPass holders at toll booths. In Western New York, the board said it would relocate the Williamsville toll barrier to help reduce traffic and accidents, though it has not determined the exact new location.

The new facility would get the highway speed E-ZPass lanes to help the flow of traffic. The plan envisions barriers that would separate E-ZPass customers from those paying by cash.

"We are re-engineering the highway to take advantage of today's technology," said Michael Fleischer, executive director of the Thruway Authority.

Besides the Williamsville barrier, which will join three others in the system with the high-speed toll lanes, officials say the Ripley toll booth near the Pennsylvania line could get the new technology as well.

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Commuters heading to Buffalo at the South Ogden Street or Black Rock barriers would see their current tolls frozen if they enroll in E-ZPass. For others, it will cost 75 cents to enter the city on the Thruway.

Thruway officials, anxious to get public backing for the first toll hike in 16 years - after failing to get through a more modest toll increase just four years ago - talked Thursday of perhaps removing the two Buffalo toll barriers someday.

City barriers criticized

Fleischer said covenants on existing Thruway bonds prevent the agency from closing toll booths. But he left open the possibility that future bonds could be written in a way to permit the Buffalo toll barriers to be shut down. Assembly Majority Leader Paul Tokasz, D-Cheektowaga, who for 10 years has pressed legislation to eliminate the toll barriers, said the authority was offering commuters "a bit of hope" by making them eligible to be exempt from the toll hike if they enroll in a new commuter discount program.

"On the other hand, I'm not sure that having tolls that discourage people from entering the city is something we should have as a state," he said.

"I hope they go beyond the commuter discounts and seriously consider eliminating those two toll barriers," he said.

Erie County Clerk David Swarts condemned the Thruway plan for not moving the Lackawanna toll barrier outside the commuting area of Buffalo.

"To raise tolls to finance a massive reconstruction project statewide without using the opportunity to move

the Lackawanna barrier further west, outside the urbanized area, makes no sense, financially or otherwise," Swarts said.

In all, construction work along the Thruway in Western New York - affecting 127 miles of highway and 74 bridges from Rochester to the Pennsylvania line - would total \$578 million by 2010. Most of the region's major Thruway work would not be undertaken until 2007 and 2008, according to documents released Thursday.

Noise walls planned

By 2010, noise walls would be erected in four locations, the congested Exit 50 barrier at I-290 would be reconstructed, and new E-ZPass lanes would be added throughout the region.

The toll hike will increase the cost of a 390-mile Thruway trip for passenger cars from \$12.10 presently to \$15.15.

A new 10 percent discount for E-ZPass holders, designed to boost participation in the program that officials believe will reduce toll booth congestion, would set the new toll at \$13.64. For a tractor-trailer, the toll would go from \$57 presently to \$76.85; a 5 percent E-ZPass discount would bring it to \$73.01.

Thruway officials say tolls either go up or portions of the Thruway will further deteriorate, and they will have to sharply scale back their ambitious construction plans. Further, they said the Thruway could no longer afford to run the state's canal system. The Erie Canal and other feeder canals were taken over by the authority in the early 1990s.

For commercial traffic, the tolls would go up 35 percent. Thruway officials defended the different rates for trucks,

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arguing that they do more damage to the highway than cars and that the state will be constructing nearly 700 new truck parking spaces at rest stops.

The toll last went up in 1988 by 32 percent for passenger cars and 38 percent for commercial vehicles.

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