



Pataki road plan assailed

By GREG CLARY
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Gov. George Pataki's proposal to privatize some public roads, railways and bridges to help pay Albany's bills is being criticized by some area lawmakers.

"It's the world's worst idea," Assemblyman Richard Brodsky, D-Greenburgh, said yesterday after attending a hearing in which the proposal was discussed. "It's like letting Donald Trump build a road and then charge tolls for it."

Assemblyman Kenneth Zebrowski, D-New City, called the idea "a shell game," warning that taxpayers would ultimately lose if the state sold or leased its assets.

"Who's going to make sure that commuters and transportation businesses don't get taken advantage of by private companies that only care about their bottom line?" Zebrowski said. "The control of roads is something people rely on their government to take care of."

Pataki proposed the idea in his recent \$106 billion state budget, highlighting Chicago's leasing of the nearly eight-mile Chicago Skyway to a consortium for \$1.8 billion, in return for a 99-year contract that allows the group to raise tolls under certain guidelines.

Brodsky said state Transportation Commissioner Joseph Boardman stated at the hearing yesterday that only new construction projects would be considered, but Brodsky disputed that, saying the statute isn't specific.

Zebrowski said new assets or old, he doesn't support the proposal.

"Whether it's roads today or in the future, it means less service," Zebrowski said. "We in government do things that will never make a profit. When you try to reduce everything to a ledger sheet, you lose the humanistic things that guide us."

Pataki brought up the idea as a way to help pay for a \$37 billion, five-year capital budget for transportation needs, at a time when the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, the Transportation Department and the Thruway Authority are all looking for more funding.

Scott Reif, a budget division spokesman, said Pataki was committed to a strong, comprehensive and long-term plan supported by a wide range of sources.

"There are no plans in place to lease bridges, highways or other facilities to private operators or to allow tolls where they are not already in place," Reif said. "The executive budget contemplates the exploration of public-private partnerships in future years but specific projects have not been identified."

Robert Poole, director of transportation studies for the Los Angeles-based Reason Foundation, a free-market policy group, said the privatization idea has been in place in Europe for years.

"The obvious pro is that government can sell a road as is and take a big up-front payment," Poole said. "Most of these are long-term leases that can be structured to limit total profits or restrict toll raises. ... If New York state were to do this, it would need to pay for really expert advice on its side of the negotiations."

Poole said Texas recently agreed to a \$7.2 billion plan that allows a Spanish company to build a 316-mile toll road in the state.

Calvin Diggs, a Cortlandt resident who owns East Coast Airport and Limousine Service, said : "Who's going to clear and maintain the roads?"

Diggs said he'd like to see a lessening of other taxes, specifically gas taxes, and improved conditions if a road ends up in the hands of private enterprise.

"If ... there's no difference, what are we really solving?"

Reach Greg Clary at gclary@thejournalnews.com or 845-578-2442 Reach Greg Clary at gclary@thejournalnews.com or 845-578-2442