



The Post-Standard

Thruway pitch: Pay some tolls at 65 mph

Board of directors endorses plan to increase tolls May 1, after public hearings.

Friday, December 17, 2004

By Erik Kriss
Albany bureau

Higher tolls on the Thruway could help create a futuristic road on which drivers wouldn't have to slow down to pay.

"Highway-speed" E-ZPass toll barriers are part of the sales pitch Thruway Authority officials made for a major toll increase that board members endorsed Thursday as part of a six-year, \$2 billion plan to upgrade the highway.

The toll increase - 25 percent for passenger vehicles and 35 percent for commercial vehicles - would take effect May 1 after public hearings around the state.

It would be the first toll hike since a 30 percent increase in 1988.

Holders of E-ZPass tags, which allow tolls to be deducted electronically from motorists' accounts as they pass through plazas, would get a discount off the higher tolls - 10 percent for passenger vehicles and 5 percent for commercial.

But people who pay \$80 for an annual permit that lets them travel any stretch of the Thruway for up to 30 miles for no extra charge would have to pay \$100 for such a permit.

The increases would help pay for a virtual doubling of the money the authority spends on capital improvements for the 641-mile superhighway.

The authority would also borrow another \$1.5 billion, adding to the \$1 billion already outstanding in long-term debt and \$675 million in short-term debt.

Without a toll hike, authority Executive Director Michael Fleischer suggested the authority could have trouble meeting the non-toll road obligations state politicians gave it in the early 1990s, such as operating the state canal system.

"I think we'd have to close the canal and lay off all those people and not make routine im-

provements to the highway," Fleischer said. "I don't think anyone would want to close the Erie Canal. It's very important to many communities. I don't think closing the Erie Canal is really a viable option."

Besides giving the Thruway Authority responsibility for the canal system, state lawmakers and former Gov. Mario Cuomo arranged for the Thruway to "buy" Interstates 84 and 287 Downstate as a way to provide quick cash to close state budget deficits.

Now the Thruway Authority has to pay to maintain and operate those assets, partly through revenues from Thruway tolls.

Among the Thruway upgrades Fleischer proposed are highway speed E-ZPass lanes in Buffalo, Albany, Woodbury, Yonkers and Canaan, where motorists could drive through at 65 mph. Although none is currently planned for Central New York, Fleischer said the Thruway of the future could eventually replace traditional toll plazas altogether with highway speed E-ZPass barriers spaced across the length of the road.

"We are kind of re-engineering the highway to take advantage of today's technology," he said.

The plan also includes several "higher speed" E-ZPass lanes - where drivers could cruise through at up to 35 mph - across the state, although none is in Central New York.

In the Syracuse area, Fleischer proposed to the board a dedicated E-ZPass lane at the Exit 36 interchange, where the Thruway connects with Interstate 81 north of Syracuse. Dedicated lanes are exclusively for E-ZPass drivers, but drivers still must limit their speed going through to the current 5 mph.

Also in Central New York, Fleischer proposed 50 new free truck parking spaces apiece at the Oneida and Chittenango service areas by 2008 and 2009, respectively. Across the state, 695 new truck parking spaces will be created.

The truck spaces are intended to provide a safe spot for long-distance drivers to sleep or rest, Fleischer said.

The plan calls for 134 miles of new or upgraded roadway and 47 new or rehabilitated bridges in the Syracuse region, defined as Exit 44 in Canandaigua to Exit 29A in Little Falls. That's part of 505 miles of improved highway, 227 bridge projects and several noise barriers statewide.

"The issue is public safety," Thruway Authority Chairman John Buono said in leading a 3-0 vote to accept the toll increase and capital plan.

"We've reduced staff," noted authority board member Nancy Carey, a daughter of former Gov. Hugh Carey. "It's a 50-year-old road. It's time we made the hard decision."

The board will have to formally approve the plan in April if tolls are to increase in May on a road that could have been toll-free when the original construction bonds were paid off in 1996.

Truckers worry a toll increase could threaten what they say is their already thin profit margin. AAA, the motorists' group, says it's concerned about how much toll money goes to non-highway purposes.

Through October of this year, 204 million passenger vehicles and 32.5 million commercial vehicles made trips on the Thruway, officials said.

"We've been doing a lot of quick fixes and Band-Aids," Fleischer said, "but that's no longer the right solution."

Fleischer said toll rates for commercial vehicles, already higher than passenger rates, would be raised more sharply partly because heavy trucks do more damage to the highway.

But he said high-volume commercial toll payers could see their existing discount enhanced.

The proposed E-ZPass discount is designed to encourage drivers to use the electronic system,

which Fleischer said is cheaper for the authority to administer than taking actual money. Part of the plan calls for making E-ZPass tags that now require a lengthy application process much easier to obtain, such as through retail outlets

The Thruway Authority is projecting \$440 million in toll collections for 2004 by year's end. Authority officials anticipate the toll increase would boost collections to \$551 million in 2005 and to \$608 million in 2006, when the higher toll rates would have been in effect the entire year

"Yes, we're asking people to pay more, but we're also presenting a plan that gives them more," Fleischer said. "It was a last resort, but we need more revenue to ensure the road stays in good condition."

© 2004 The Post-Standard Used with permission

Copyright 2004 syracuse.com. All Rights Reserved