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E-ZPass to offer relief from pain of toll hike

Likely May 1 increase first in 17 years

By Judy Rife

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jrife@th-record.com

There's some good news buried in the New York State Thruway Authority's proposed toll increase
But only if you use E-ZPass.

"We think offering discounts for using E-ZPass will shift more people to E-ZPass – and our goal is to increase E-ZPass use," said Larry DeCosmo, the authority's point man on the proposal.

The authority's board of directors set the stage for the first toll increase in 17 years on Dec. 16 when it approved a six-year capital plan worth \$2.1 billion for the 641-mile highway.

The additional revenue will help pay for repairing about 500 miles of roadway and 220 bridges as well as installing some 36 new dedicated, higher-speed or highway speed E-ZPass lanes.

The proposal would raise tolls 25 percent for passenger vehicles and 35 percent for commercial vehicles as soon as May 1 – and another 10 percent in 2008. On the Tappan Zee Bridge, the \$3 toll would rise to \$4 this year and to \$4.50 in three years.

Cars and trucks with E-ZPass accounts, however, will get the first-ever discounts at Thruway toll booths: 10 percent and 5 percent, respectively. And they will not pay more in 2008.

At the same time, the authority is proposing to expand the number of commuter, or discount, plans for frequent users, plans that require an E-ZPass account to participate.

The most controversial plan, for the Tappan Zee Bridge, would double the toll, to \$2 from \$1, but still fail as a traffic management tool. Local residents as well as the region's transportation advocacy organizations have criticized the authority for ignoring the potential benefit of congestion pricing in its bid to rebuild or replace the aging bridge.

"They're reducing the discount, which is good, but it will still be cheaper for people to drive across the bridge at rush hour than it is for them to take the bus," said Jon Orcutt, executive director of the Tri-State Transportation Campaign. "And creating new discount plans will only make it harder to convert to congestion pricing in the future."

DeCosmo said the Thruway Authority's staff discussed congestion pricing, or charging a premium to use a bridge or highway at peak hours to ease congestion, and decided against it – at least for now.

"It's a double-edge sword," DeCosmo said. "We're already raising the toll 100 percent and we've got all those people who can't change their work schedules and we want to make the increase equitable."

The same thinking about fairness is behind the new frequency discount plans for people who use the "barrier" portion of the Thruway from Harriman south versus the "ticket" portion from Woodbury north. Three Orange County commuters sued the authority several years ago to protest this allegedly discriminatory policy. They lost.

Now, they'll be eligible for a plan that will keep the cost of using the Harriman toll plaza at 50 cents. Other E-ZPass customers will pay 68 cents and cash customers, 75 cents.

"I'm delighted," said Michael Sussman, the Goshen lawyer who represented the commuters. "It's actually kind of comical, when I recall how they went on at great length about why they couldn't do it, to now have them doing it."

DeCosmo said the authority is confident the public will respond to these incentives, especially since E-ZPass toll collection is going to become easier and faster.

Although the Thruway Authority pioneered E-ZPass 10 years ago, electronic collections still only account for 53.7 percent of transactions. At the Tappan Zee Bridge, the rate jumps to 85.2 percent at rush hour, from 68.9 percent, but at the Harriman toll plaza, it increases only to 67.6 percent from 61.6 percent.

Dedicated E-ZPass lanes can process 900 vehicles an hour at 5 mph, three times the volume that a toll collector in a booth can handle. At 25 or 35 mph, higher-speed E-ZPass lanes can process another 300 to 400 vehicles an hour.

Highway-speed toll plazas, of course, can process tags on vehicles traveling 65 mph. The Woodbury and Yonkers toll plazas will be among the first that the Thruway Authority converts to what is known as open-road tolling.

In the short term, DeCosmo said, greater E-ZPass use will ease delays, raise speeds, expand capacity.

and reduce air pollution. In the long term, it will also build a foundation for full-scale conversion to open-road tolling, congestion pricing and electronic traffic management

"Ultimately, we want people to be able to get on in Buffalo and travel to New York City without stopping or slowing down," said DeCosmo.

The possibilities

The New York State Thruway Authority could raise tolls as early as May 1, after holding public hearings and taking final action on the proposal. The new toll schedule will give discounts to passenger and commercial vehicles with E-ZPass accounts for the first time. Here are some sample tolls:

New Paltz to Newburgh

Now: 50 cents

May 1 (cash): 65 cents

May 1 (E-ZPass): 59 cents

Newburgh to Suffern

Now: 95 cents

May 1 (cash): \$1.15

May 1 (E-ZPass): \$1.04

Harriman

Now: 50 cents

May 1 (cash): 75 cents

May 1 (E-ZPass): 68 cents

New commuter plan: 50 cents

Tappan Zee Bridge

Now: \$3

May 1 (cash): \$4

May 1 (E-ZPass): \$3.60

Commuter plan: \$2 (from \$1)

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