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## Privatizing highways part of Pataki's plans

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Albany -- Gov. George Pataki may have a bridge to sell you. And he may have some highways and tunnels to unload as well.

The governor's \$105.5 billion budget proposal would give the Thruway Authority, Metropolitan Transportation Authority and state Department of Transportation officials the authority to seek proposals to privatize parts of the state's network of roads, railways and bridges.

Along with a litany of new fees for motorists, it's part of Pataki's plan to help pay for a \$36.6 billion, five-year plan to maintain and improve New York's crumbling transportation infrastructure and potentially come up with some new projects.

It could also mean new tolls and fares across New York, as long as any privatization deal adds traffic capacity.

The Pataki administration won't say how much the privatization plan could bring into the state over the next few years, but other governments across the country have realized billions of new dollars from similar schemes.

Chicago officials, for example, unanimously approved a \$1.8 billion, 99-year lease with a private consortium last year to take over the 7.8-mile-long Skyway in that city. That deal will double tolls within eight years, but some city officials called it the best deal in city history.

In budget documents, Pataki cited the Skyway project as a model for what he wants in New York. He also mentioned the \$338 million in private funding used to build a highway from Washington, D.C., to that city's international airport, and a new privately funded extension of a monorail in Las Vegas.

State Transportation Commissioner Joe Boardman said last year the state's roads and bridges have been deteriorating at a rate faster than they've been fixed. He also floated the idea of additional toll roads.

Pataki budget officials conceded there is only enough revenue for three years of the new five-year transportation capital plan in the budget proposal, which includes \$17.4 billion for the DOT and \$19.2 billion for the MTA. New federal revenues or money from brand-new sources, like private or public consortiums, will be needed to make up the difference.

John Corlett, government affairs director of AAA New York, said yesterday was the first he had heard of Pataki's privatization proposal.

"If it did add capacity where it otherwise wouldn't be added, I guess we'd have to entertain the idea," Corlett said. "But if you are taking an existing facility and privatizing it, I think that raises some serious questions."

Bill Joyce, president of the New York State Motor Truck Association, had similar concerns. He said he would oppose any plans to add truck lanes to interstates if it meant adding truck-only tolls.

On the other hand, such a proposal could help pave the way for a long-sought highway across the top of the state, the so-called Rooftop Highway.

"If they can make a financial case for that, and toll it, fine," Joyce said.

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