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## Thruway toll hike to benefit Hudson Valley

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The Hudson Valley is going to get a good return on payment of those higher Thruway tolls

About \$728 million worth of improvements to its 178 miles of the 641-mile interstate highway, to be exact.

"We represent approximately 35 percent of the Thruway – and of the Thruway's budget," said Ramesh Mehta, director of the New York division that stretches from New York City to New Paltz.

The improvements are part of the six-year \$2.1 billion capital program that the New York State Thruway Authority's board of directors approved last month.

The authority plans to pay for the program by raising tolls for the first time in 17 years. The proposal, still subject to public hearings and final approval, calls for toll increases of 25 percent for passenger vehicles and 35 percent for commercial vehicles as of May 1. Tolls would jump another 10 percent in 2008.

Cars and trucks equipped with E-ZPass would see less of an increase this year and none in 2008.

"Though I hate the idea of higher tolls, our stretch of Thruway is in tough shape," said James McKenna of Harriman, a commuter who uses the highway regularly. "Some of the potholes can eat a wheel and rattle your teeth."

Mehta said the single biggest slice of that \$728 million pie, some \$140 million, will go toward repairing the steel work, deck and concrete substructure of the Tappan Zee Bridge.

Although the Thruway Authority has been engaged in the environmental review process about whether to replace or rebuild the 50-year-old bridge for several years now, Mehta said its completion is still two or three years away. Even if everything about the review's ultimate recommendations were fast-tracked, he estimated another 10 years will pass before a new or improved bridge is in place.

"We've had another big deck failure – we still have 78 percent of the original deck – and we're seeing some other elements of the bridge deteriorate to the point where we have to do some repairs so we don't compromise public safety," said Mehta. "Repairs are to be expected, but what is happening with the bridge is that rate of failure is going up."

The next biggest project after the bridge is the reconstruction of the Woodbury toll plaza to accommodate open-road tolling, or highway speed E-ZPass, by mid-2008. Similar projects are slated for Yonkers and New Rochelle, at the junction of Interstate 95.

The ramp from the Harriman toll plaza on Route 17 to the Thruway will also be revamped to improve the merge with the Thruway and eliminate the backup at the booths.

The division, however, hasn't earmarked any money toward construction of a new ramp between Route 32 and Route 17 and the Harriman toll plaza to eliminate traffic-clogging turns. Mehta called any commitment premature until a project is formally endorsed by the state Department of Transportation and local municipalities.

"It's the No. 1 consensus project in our Southeastern Orange County Traffic Task Force study," said David Church, the county's planning commissioner. "The timing of our study [released Jan. 12] and of the capital plan is unfortunate but we've always expected the DOT to take the lead on any project, so I don't think any harm is done."

The third biggest project is the ongoing construction of a direct connection between the Thruway and Interstate 84 in Newburgh. Work on the second phase, building new offices and garages for state police and the Thruway Authority as well as a new toll plaza, will begin this year. The third phase, construction of new ramps and bridges, will begin next year. The new interchange is scheduled to open mid-2008.

Mehta said 87 bridges will be repaired or replaced and "every inch" of asphalt will be redone over the six years. Most of the repaving will be done at night to reduce the impact on traffic.

Truckers, who have been forced to park alongside the highway to use the crowded Plattekill and Modena travel plazas, will see their parking lots expanded by a combined 160 spaces.

The two big projects that didn't make the cut in this capital plan were Mehta's proposals to widen the Thruway to six lanes between Woodbury and Newburgh, and to eight lanes between the Garden State Parkway and Route 9W.

"We had a limited amount of money and we had to prioritize," he said. "I think they will be in the next plan, because traffic is still growing and we will need the capacity."

**Six years of improvements**

The New York State Thruway Authority's \$2.1 billion capital plan for the next six years includes \$728 million for the 178 miles between New York City and New Paltz. The money will pay for:

Bringing highway speed E-ZPass, or open-road tolling, to the Woodbury toll plaza

Finishing the new interchange between the Thruway and Interstate 84 in Newburgh

Repairing the Tappan Zee Bridge

Repaving the entire roadway

Fixing 87 bridges.

Adding more parking for truckers at the Plattekill and Modena travel plazas.

Improving the merge between the ramp at the Harriman toll plaza and the Thruway.

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