



print story back

Thruway toll boost gets green light

Approval of \$2 billion plan for improvements sets up public hearings

By CATHY WOODRUFF, Staff writer
First published: Friday, December 17, 2004

ALBANY -- The Thruway Authority gave preliminary approval Thursday to a 25 percent toll hike to take effect in May, calling it necessary to maintain and improve the aging highway system.

The plan, which now will be aired in public hearings, also calls for a 35 percent toll increase for trucks, along with new discounts for commuters and commercial carriers who use E-ZPass.

The three-member board, with member John R. Riedman of Rochester participating via speaker phone, gave the go-ahead with little discussion after hearing Executive Director Michael Fleischer's presentation on a \$2 billion, six-year capital plan for roads and bridges. The plan also includes another \$600,000 for equipment, facilities and the state canal system.

The program includes reconstruction and rehabilitation of 505 miles of the 641-mile toll road system, 695 new truck parking spaces, noise-reduction walls, 227 new and rehabilitated bridges, and higher-speed and highway-speed E-ZPass lanes.

"The issue is public safety and making sure we get people from one place to another as efficiently as possible," said Chairman John Buono.

"This is a 50-year-old road, and I think it's time we just make the decision and start the process," said board member Nancy Carey Cassidy of Loudonville.

If the toll plan receives final approval in the spring, it will take effect May 1 and be the first increase since 1988. The authority's last attempt to raise tolls was scotched in 2000 under pressure from legislators, Gov. George Pataki and others.

So far, this plan has stirred little organized criticism, though the New York State Motor Truck Association issued a statement saying the group is "seriously concerned."

"We are dismayed to see the size of the increase and the differential in the toll hikes between passenger cars and commercial vehicles," the association said. "The New York trucking industry is already saddled with astronomically large insurance rates and fuel prices. The toll hike will exceed the profit margin carriers may have."

Fleischer defended the toll hike, however, saying Thruway users will gain smoother, safer, faster trips for their money.

"We're not just asking people to pay more for the same experience," he said. "We need more revenue to invest in this infrastructure. We need to fix Exit 24. We need to fix Woodbury (toll barrier) and we need resources to do that."

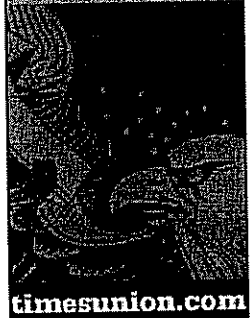
Thruway officials say full details of the infrastructure improvements in the Capital Region won't be determined until an Albany Corridor Study is complete in January. But they say one certainty is an overhaul or replacement of Albany's Exit 24, the junction of Interstates 87 and 90 and the Thruway's busiest interchange.



TIMES UNION
E-EDITION

An EXACT digital copy of the print edition is available online

[CLICK HERE FOR A FREE SAMPLE](#)



timesunion.com

Among the possibilities are a "flyover" ramp that would allow traffic to flow directly from one interstate to the other and a toll barrier on the Thruway's main line. Either option would likely include highway-speed E-ZPass lanes that would allow motorists to zip through the toll plaza without slowing.

A third lane between Exit 23 and Exit 24 also is likely.

Noise-reduction walls probably would be required as a part of the Albany projects, said John Brizzell, the Thruway's deputy executive director and chief engineer. "My guess is there will be noise barriers constructed in the Albany region in the next six years," he said.

In addition to the toll hikes, the Thruway Authority also is proposing to offer 10 percent discounts for motorists who pay their tolls electronically through E-ZPass accounts. The carrot-and-stick approach also calls for a 10 percent increase in tolls for cash-paying customers in 2008.

Trucks and other commercial traffic also would see discounts of at least 5 percent for using E-ZPass, with larger discounts for more frequent commercial users.

E-ZPass now accounts for about 55 percent of toll transactions on the Thruway, and with efforts to boost that even further, Fleischer said the agency will contract for a comprehensive analysis of how and where tolls are collected.

Only two of the system's interstates, I-84 and I-287, are free of tolls under terms of the state legislation that tacked them onto the Thruway network in 1992.

Annual spending on Thruway capital projects in recent years has ranged from about \$150 million to \$180 million, officials said. The \$2 billion capital plan would add some \$333 million a year for additional projects, which would be financed both with debt and with money from the operating budget.

Thruway officials project that the toll increase will boost toll revenues to \$551 million next year and \$608 million in 2006, the first full year for the increase. Total toll collections last year were \$427 million.

When the Thruway was built in the 1950s, tolls were to end in 1996. That plan was scratched after a bipartisan legislative task force recommended maintaining the tolls. The Thruway Authority Transition Advisory Council described the issue as "a choice between tolls and taxes," concluding "tolls are the better choice." Cathy Woodruff can be reached at 454-5093 or by e-mail at cwoodruff@timesunion.com.

All Times Union materials copyright 1996-2004, Capital Newspapers Division of The Hearst Corporation, Albany, N.Y.

[CONTACT US](#) | [HOW TO ADVERTISE](#) | [PRIVACY](#) | [FULL COPYRIGHT](#) | [CLASSROOM ENRICHMENT](#)