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January 26, 2005

Rte. 17 upgrade hits rut

DOT says state lacks cash for Interstate 86 completion

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Albany – The state does not have the money to complete the upgrade of Route 17 into an interstate, the state's top transportation officials said yesterday

Transportation Commissioner Joseph Boardman told state lawmakers yesterday that Gov. George Pataki's proposed five-year transportation capital plan, which includes major work to finish the highway's conversion into Interstate 86, is only funded for three years.

But some projects, such as replacing the Tappan Zee Bridge, could fit into a proposal to privatize state roads and bridges to make up for the projected revenue shortfall, he said. One top lobbyist said the state has been approached by several consortiums about public-private partnerships, including the California-based Bechtel Corp., a major engineering and construction conglomerate supporting reconstruction efforts in Iraq.

Completion of Interstate 86, which snakes through Orange and Sullivan counties toward western New York, is a top priority for lawmakers.

"I think when we start talking to the governor, how we need the improvements in Orange and Sullivan counties to anticipate the casinos, I think he will step up and do it," said Sen. John Bonacic, R-C-Mount Hope.

Pataki's 2005-06 budget proposal includes a \$17.4 billion five-year capital plan for highways and bridges, funded primarily through taxes on gasoline and motor vehicle fees. Even with a proposed increase in those fees, the projected revenues would pay debt costs only for the first three years of the plan.

"That obviously concerns me tremendously," said Sen. Tom Libous, R-C-Binghamton, chairman of the Senate Transportation Committee. "This is a three-year plan and not a five-year plan."

To make up the difference, Pataki is holding out hope for significant increases in federal funding and proposing a plan to allow the sale of various state transportation assets.

Boardman, who said the privatization plan wasn't his idea, said Route 17 likely would not qualify. The Tappan Zee, however, "could be a potential candidate," he said.

Replacing the bridge could run anywhere from \$4 billion to \$20 billion, depending on whether a rail line is included. A decision on a replacement plan is not expected until at least the end of this year, and it could take up to a decade to plan and build a new bridge.

The I-86 conversion was scheduled for completion at the end of this decade. Upgrading the section linking the Southern Tier near Binghamton to the Thruway in Woodbury is expected to cost \$600 million.

Much of the final construction work on portions in Orange and Sullivan counties is scheduled for the final two years of the capital plan, Boardman said.

Libous, whose district includes the central portion of the highway, couldn't promise the funding will ultimately arrive.

"Certainly, I-86 is a big project for the state of New York," he said. "We need to figure out a way to get it done and get it ready for any casino growth."

Keys to the story

Gov. George Pataki embraced the idea of upgrading Route 17 to an interstate as an economic development strategy in the mid-1990s.

It cost just \$5 million to convert the 177 miles of Route 17 into Interstate 86 from Elmira west along the Southern Tier, because it was a relatively young highway built to interstate standards.

The rest of the 363-mile route, linking the Southern Tier to the Thruway in Woodbury, is estimated to cost \$600 million.

Now, Pataki's proposed budget provides revenues for only three years of a new \$17.4 billion highway and bridge capital plan, which includes the Route 17 conversion.

State officials are now reviewing plans to rehabilitate or replace the aging Tappan Zee Bridge, a project that could cost up to \$20 billion.