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Thruway wants to raise tolls 25 percent for cars

Thursday, December 16, 2004

By Erik Kriss
Albany bureau

Thruway tolls could jump by 25 percent for cars and 35 percent for commercial vehicles under a plan to be presented today.

The increased revenues would help pay for what several sources described as a doubling of the Thruway's construction program.

Authority Executive Director Michael Fleischer will present the multiyear capital plan to the authority board in Albany. The plan is expected to include numerous projects and improvements around the state.

"It will address critical infrastructure needs, traffic demands and improved customer service along the 641-mile system through 2010," authority spokesman Dan Gilbert said Wednesday.

Gilbert would not confirm a toll increase is in the plan, but said Fleischer "will discuss the financing of the plan."

Gov. George Pataki, who controls the authority, would not rule out the first toll increase in 16 years. In 2000, he publicly opposed a proposed toll increase.

Pataki said he generally opposes toll, tax, fee and fare increases and prefers that economic growth provide the money to keep state government agencies operating.

"I also understand there are times when that simply doesn't 3

meet the hard fiscal realities an entity faces," he said at a state Capitol news conference Wednesday.

In 2000, the state was enjoying surpluses. For the fiscal year that begins April

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1, it must close a projected \$6 billion deficit out of a \$100 billion-plus budget.

If tolls were raised under the plan, EZPass users would get a 10 percent discount, and new EZPass lanes would be opened at busy toll plazas. Fifty-one percent of toll transactions involve EZPass users.

Authority officials say out-of-state motorists and commercial vehicles pay about 30 percent of all tolls collected.

Truckers already are objecting to the plan, saying that if tolls must be increased, they should be increased gradually.

"Margins in trucking are so small, that's a significant increase in cost per mile," said William Joyce, president of the New York State Motor Truck Association, which represents about 825 companies ranging from major trucking firms to businesses such as P&C Food Markets.

"Sixteen years is a long time, and I'll give you that. The other side of it is, are the percentages the right numbers? Couldn't they be graded? Do they need 35 percent tomorrow? Couldn't it be stepped - 5 percent this year, 5 percent next year?"

The AAA questioned how much toll money goes to support non-highway functions of the Thruway Authority, such as running the state's canal system.

"From the motorist's perspective, the most important point is minimizing the diversion of toll money to off-road uses, such as the canal system," said John Corlett, a lobbyist for the automobile association.

"When we look at this new proposal, that will be one of the key things we look at," he said. "Is it fair? We appreciate it's been 16 years since they had a toll hike."

Joyce concurred with AAA in questioning toll-payers subsidization of other entities controlled by the authority. For example, to help bail the state out of a budget crisis in the early 1990s, the authority "bought" Interstate 84, a non-toll road.

"Is it fair for Syracuse-area Thruway users to pay for 84?" Joyce asked.

The Thruway could have been made toll-free and supported by tax dollars and federal aid when its original construction bonds were paid off in 1996. But a committee appointed by lawmakers and Gov. Mario Cuomo decided to keep the toll system going to ensure a steady stream of maintenance money.

In 1989 - the year after tolls were increased by 30 percent - tolls generated \$289.9 million. In 2003 toll revenues had grown to \$427.2 million. But that still falls far short of the total Thruway Authority budget of \$752.4 million in 2004-05.

Some toll revenues are used to subsidize other Thruway Authority responsibilities, including the canal system. That system costs \$65 million to \$70 million per year, but boater fees raise only \$1.8 million to \$2 million.

Construction contractors say a new and expanded capital plan for the Thruway is overdue and that the toll hike under consideration might not be enough.


"There's no free road," said A.J. Castelbuono, president of Associated General Contractors, which represents about 500 highway construction-related firms. "You can't maintain them forever on a free basis."

"The New York State Thruway is the modern equivalent of the Erie Canal. It's in the same condition as all the other roads, which is poor condition. In the last 10 years, we've allowed our roads to deteriorate because there wasn't the political will to raise revenue or there wasn't enough revenue."

Castelbuono said 16 years since the last toll increase is "65 percent cost-of-living ago."

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