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Posted on Mon, Sep. 8, 2008

Toll lanes considered for I-95, Schuylkill

By David Spett
Inquirer Harrisburg Bureau

HARRISBURG - Imagine, for a fee, being able to bypass traffic on the Schuylkill Expressway at rush hour and avoid the migraine that comes with it.

Some state lawmakers are working to implement the concept in Pennsylvania, and they say it is not as far-fetched as it might seem.

Express toll lanes (ETLs) and High Occupancy Toll (HOT) lanes are being built around the country, allowing motorists to pay extra to avoid traffic jams and arrive at their destinations faster than ever.

Here's how they work: If a road is congested, or if motorists want to travel faster, they have the option of paying extra to drive on new express lanes, built and run by a private company. The lanes might be aside or even above the rest of the highway.

All drivers on ETLs pay a fee. On HOT lanes, some high-occupancy vehicles are allowed to ride for a discount or free.

In northern Virginia, HOT lanes are being built along a 14-mile stretch of the Capital Beltway, I-495. The state expects completion by 2013.

There, toll rates will appear on digital signs above the highway. The price will fluctuate frequently depending on traffic volume, with greater volume raising prices, and vehicle occupancy, with higher-occupancy vehicles paying less or nothing.

Similar lanes are being built along I-95 in Baltimore, with completion slated for 2011.

For years, states in the West and South, such as California, Texas and Colorado, have used express lanes with standardized toll rates. Only now are Mid-Atlantic states following the trend.

Several Pennsylvania legislators said the Schuylkill and I-95 in Philadelphia are at the top of the hypothetical list of roads that might get HOT or express toll lanes.

In June, the state Senate unanimously passed a bill sponsored by Sen. Roger Madigan (R., Lycoming) that would allow state agencies to obtain bids for such projects.

At 1 p.m. today at SEPTA's 1234 Market St. office in Philadelphia, the House Transportation Committee will hold a hearing, its third this summer, to consider Madigan's bill and a similar one from State Rep. Richard Geist (R., Blair).

Lawmakers said the idea faces much less resistance than Gov. Rendell's proposed lease of the Pennsylvania

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LATES

Turnpike.

Many of the state lawmakers trying to stop the turnpike lease said they were open to working with corporations to add capacity to packed highways.

These lawmakers drew a sharp distinction between selling off or leasing entire state assets, such as the turnpike, and allowing corporations to add capacity to packed highways that the state cannot afford to expand.

"We simply don't have the money to do these projects, and many of them are necessary for congestion and growth purposes," said Rep. Joe Markosek, an Allegheny County Democrat and chairman of the House Transportation Committee, who is among the most prominent opponents of the turnpike lease.

"Pennsylvania needs to have a bill on the books sooner rather than later."

Like the proposed turnpike lease, privately run express lanes could bring in significant revenues for the state, which would receive a share of any profits from the toll money.

State Rep. John Perzel, a Philadelphia Republican who used to support the turnpike lease but now opposes it, said he has no equivocations about privately run express toll lanes. In 2004, he publicly proposed building an elevated road above the Schuylkill Expressway.

"Are there enough people that just want to get downtown faster? I think there are," Perzel said.

He said the legislature has enough support from both parties to pass Madigan or Geist's bill. He also said corporations have expressed interest in building the express toll lanes.

The bills under consideration would apply not only to road projects. They also would allow the state to consider creating privately run rail lines and airports.

That might allow creation of a train system from downtown Pittsburgh to the city's airport, Perzel said.

Chuck Ardo, the governor's spokesman, said Rendell might be open to privatization projects besides the turnpike.

"We would want to see how [the turnpike lease] works out before we enter into, or even consider, other partnerships at this point," Ardo said.

Contact staff writer David Spett at 717-236-7402.

Comments

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Posted by **dartvader** 02:06 PM, 09/08/2008

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The day a rich jerk in a Range Rover can pay to drive somewhere faster than the average Joe is the day this country truly descends into class warfare. The rich already pay a lower effective tax rate (given the cap on payroll taxes and the low rates on capital gains and dividends). They already get better educations, better health care, better nutrition, and everything else money can buy. The fact that people in luxury cars have to sit in the same traffic as the rest of us is one of the few consolations left for the middle and working classes.

Posted by **tiger** 02:45 PM, 09/11/2008

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Pie in the Sky BS. This Idea wil not fly...

Posted by **JAYE MCGOMERY** 04:47 PM, 09/11/2008

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This is about the most "stupidest" idea I ever heard! Whose great idea is this? Somebody has to see a psychiatrist about this ridiculous solution....Rendel needs a psychiatrist, he doesn't know what to do next to generate money for Pennsylvania. How about reducing his salary and all the other drones in Harrisburg for starters.....

Posted by **rayne215** 05:10 PM, 09/11/2008

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i think its a good idea

Posted by **benny1** 05:33 PM, 09/11/2008

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dart- if the express lanes take away 10-20% of the traffic off the regulqar roads then the jams will ease up and the state will get extra revenue. don'l let your bitterness cloud the reality of what could be a great idea

Posted by **natedog** 09:47 PM, 09/11/2008

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