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Time for tollway users to speak up

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By Daily Herald Editorial Board

Today, suburban commuters get a chance to be heard. We hope they take advantage of it.

The Illinois Toll Highway Authority begins a public hearing process on its 15-year capital plan that, if approved, could raise tolls throughout the tollway system in northern Illinois.

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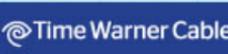
 As rate hike looms, tollway workers get free I-

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We have already said in this space that there are lots of questions about these plans and how to pay for them. And we encouraged the board to take into account what they hear at the public hearings, the first of them taking place today in Geneva and Wheaton.

One of our biggest concerns is the proposed near doubling of tolls that in today's economy is very hard to swallow. With that in mind, we were very pleased to see one tollway board member offer an alternative. And while we are not ready to say this proposal is the one to be adopted, we are happy someone is contemplating a more tempered approach in the construction timetable and the toll increases needed to support it.

The new plan, submitted Monday by tollway board Director Bill Morris of Grayslake, calls for a 15-cent toll increase compared to the 35-cent to 45-cent increase in the original proposal. He also envisions a 10-year plan, rather than 15 years, with reviews every three years that could include smaller toll hikes.

"If you do 15 cents now and a nickel or dime in three years and a nickel or dime in another three years, it makes more sense than doing it all at once," Morris told the Daily Herald's transportation writer Marni Pyke.

We were also pleased to see Tollway Chairman Paula Wolff comment favorably on Morris' plan. "It will be considered and we'll move forward with a series of public hearings and see what people have to say," she said.

Indeed, now it's your turn, tollway users. Hearings are scheduled from 4 to 6 p.m. today at the Kane County Government Center in Geneva and from 7 to 9 p.m. at the DuPage County Government Center in Wheaton. More hearings will be held in Libertyville, Huntley,

Schaumburg and Buffalo Grove over the next week. Comment on these two plans — or suggest your own — as whatever is decided could have a substantial effect on your daily pocketbook but also a positive effect on your commute when all the work is done.

The plan calls for spending \$12 billion for, among other things: existing road maintenance; expanding the Elgin-O'Hare Expressway east into the airport and building a western bypass around O'Hare; building an interchange at I-57 and the Tri-State Tollway; studying the expansion of Route 53 into Lake County into Lake County; and widening the Jane Addams Tollway.

Pyke estimates that a daily Tri-State Tollway commute could cost \$182 more each year or a daily commute between Lombard and Arlington Heights \$337.50 more, if the original toll hike proposal goes into effect. Meanwhile, Palos Hills Mayor Gerald R. Bennett, chairman of the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, told us in a letter to the editor that the plan will "bolster our regional's status as one of the world's great economic centers."

Lots for the board to think about and still more for them to hear.