

Rauner launches plan to add toll lanes on I-55

By [Greg Hinz](#) February 04, 2016

Gov. Bruce Rauner today floated a plan to add a pair of lanes, likely with tolls, to crowded Interstate 55 (the Stevenson Expressway) between I-355 (Veterans Memorial Tollway) and I-90/94 (the Dan Ryan Expressway).

Though the proposal needs approval by the highly polarized General Assembly, one key Democratic lawmaker threw his backing behind the plan, perhaps a sign that something actually will occur.

Specifically, Rauner announced his legislative allies have filed legislation to allow the Illinois Department of Transportation to negotiate a deal with an as-yet-unspecified private group, known as a public-private partnership, to study options for the Stevenson. Among those options are tolls that would go up or down depending on the time of day, a strategy known as congestion pricing.

The goal is to add at least one lane in each direction on a 25-mile stretch of road that now carries an average of 170,000 vehicles a day. Not yet determined is whether the lanes will be tolled or free, or express toll lanes. But it's hard to imagine a private company would be interested in fronting the hundreds of millions of dollars likely needed without the promise of a revenue stream.

For the state, a public-private partnership could allow it to do work that Illinois can't afford, with lawmakers reluctant to raise gasoline or other taxes for the state's road construction fund.

"Managed lanes are truly an expressway within an expressway, one more option that will make travel more convenient," said IDOT Secretary Randy Blankenhorn.

Blankenhorn previously headed the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, a government group which has strongly backed the idea of using the Stevenson as a public-private partnership model. CMAP's current executive director, [Joe Szabo](#), promptly endorsed Rauner's idea, saying in a statement, "Although new to our region, congestion pricing has been used successfully in the U.S. since 1995, with more than two dozen instances where it is being deployed to give drivers better choices for getting around."

Such systems are common in the Dallas/Fort Worth area in particular, with freeways and tollways running parallel to each other.

But CMAP has been a vigorous opponent of another public-private partnership project, the proposed Illiana Corridor, saying the expressway would be an economic boondoggle.

That suggests that though Rauner's plan got some immediate backing from Illinois Senate Transportation Committee Chairman Martin Sandoval, D-Chicago, legislators ought to ask some tough questions.

A 2011 state law allows IDOT to build, finance, operate and maintain highway projects using a public-private partnership model, so long as the Legislature adopts a resolution in favor of the project. The General Assembly's two GOP leaders, Sen. Christine Radogno and Rep. Jim Durkin, appeared with Rauner at a news conference today and are backing such a resolution.

IDOT says using a public-private partnership model could allow it to save up to \$425 million in construction costs. Work could begin as soon as next year and be completed by 2019.

Update, 4 p.m. — A sign that Rauner's proposal might face some headwinds is coming from Howard Learner, head of Environmental Law & Policy Center.

"When it comes to these types of P3 deals, the devil is in the details," Learner says in a statement. "We need to

make sure that the public is truly receiving its fair share of the benefits, and that the private investors are assuming their fair share of financial risks as well as potential rewards. The Illiana Tollway is an unfortunate example of a poorly designed P3 that imposes much too much financial risk on the public."
