

Rauner plans public-private update to I-55 that may add tolls



Governor suggests new express pay lane on I-55. Feb. 4, 2016. (CBS Chicago)

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Gov. [Bruce Rauner](#) on Thursday suggested the state should partner with private investors to build special toll lanes along a congested section of the Stevenson Expressway.

If built, the new lanes would span a 25-mile stretch of Interstate 55 between the Veterans Memorial Tollway and the Dan Ryan Expressway. It's possible carpoolers could use the new lanes for free, the governor said.

Rauner's idea is to build the new lanes under a public-private partnership model where private contractors would help pay for the construction and recoup their investment by charging tolls. Such an arrangement must be approved by a majority of the [General Assembly](#) before it can be pursued.

"This is fundamentally about growth," Rauner said. "We're asking financiers to invest and provide growth opportunity that it's very difficult for taxpayers to pay for right now."

Illinois Transportation Secretary Randy Blankenhorn said he hopes to have a decision on how to design the expansion this spring and for construction to begin in late 2017. The administration also would have to find a company willing to take on such a deal.

As envisioned, the expansion would create at least one new lane on each side of the expressway. Tolls on that lane would be set based on the level of congestion on the expressway and in the special lane. Existing lanes would remain free, but drivers who want to avoid traffic would have the option to enter the new lane at a price.

Drivers "can choose to pay a toll or not," Rauner said. "If they're in a hurry and they want to get around the congestion, they can pay a toll and we'll try to keep the tolls modest as we can so that they can get where they need to go very quickly."

That "congestion pricing" concept has existed in the U.S. since 1995, when express lanes were installed in Orange County, Calif. It is used in at least 10 states, according to the [Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning](#), which has studied the idea.

Supporters said adding a special lane would help relieve the congestion that often turns I-55 into a post-concert parking lot between the suburbs and the city.

Peter Skosey, executive vice president of the Metropolitan Planning Council, a nonprofit focused on regional growth, said that simply adding extra lanes doesn't always relieve traffic because more drivers will flock to the road. By limiting the amount of drivers who can use the road, either through tolls or designating lanes as carpool only, traffic will continue to flow smoothly.

"The toll would be adjusted based upon the demand, so that you can always ensure a free-flow movement," said Skosey, who said the goal is to keep cars moving at least 45 mph.

Blankenhorn said a rate for the tolls has not been set, but he pointed to a CMAP study that estimated a price of \$2.75 each way. Upper limits for the toll pricing will be part of contract negotiations with investors, he said.

First, Rauner needs approval from lawmakers to move forward with the idea, and he is warring with the Democratic majority over a budget for state government. The concept, however, has support from some Democrats who see it as a way to create jobs and improve infrastructure during a time of financial turmoil for the state.

"We need to keep people in Illinois working," said Sen. [Martin Sandoval](#), a Chicago Democrat who chairs the Senate Transportation Committee. "Working families deserve projects like this. This is going to pay the mortgage, this is going to pay the bills, this is going to keep life going, the quality of life that

many of us enjoy, for over a decade."

Sen. Heather Steans, D-Chicago, who has supported the idea of private-public partnerships, said it's a way to fund projects the state might not otherwise be able to take on as it enters its eighth month without a budget.

"If we had to rely solely on state resources, we couldn't possibly contemplate doing this project right now," Steans said.

But she cautioned that the state needs to protect the public's interest before taking private funds, citing Chicago's privatization of parking meters as an example of what could go wrong. "Taxpayers have to benefit from these projects," Steans said.

Mayor Rahm Emanuel has tried to get public-private partnerships going through his Chicago Infrastructure Trust, but progress has been slow.

This is the third time in a month that Rauner, who made his fortune as a private equity investor, has turned to the private sector with a partnership offer.

Last month, Rauner assembled a group of business leaders to volunteer their time for a state program to promote minority entrepreneurship. Last week, Rauner's administration formed a not-for-profit corporation to negotiate business tax incentives on behalf of the state, and on Wednesday the governor directed his Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity to work with the private entity.

Rauner said he expects investors will be willing to put their money behind the I-55 lane project.

"My experience in this world — I've had some over the last 30 years — I think we'll have investors very interested in this opportunity," Rauner said.

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