

Blackhawks to host NHL draft in Chicago, sources say

Transportation updated: 2/4/2016 4:34 PM

Would you pay to go faster on I-55?



An experimental tolled lane could ease congestion on I-55.

Daily Herald File Photo



Marni Pyke

Gov. Bruce Rauner is hoping the private sector will pitch in to widen the Stevenson Expressway (I-55) between the city and suburbs using "managed lanes."

The public-private partnership would be a first in Illinois and focuses on adding an express lane in both directions of I-55 that's either tolled or for carpools. Such an arrangement would get results quicker and cheaper than conventional methods, the governor said at a Thursday news conference.

The Illinois Department of Transportation has spent months studying how to relieve traffic jams on I-55. The plan involves building another lane in each direction of I-55 between Veterans Memorial Tollway and the Dan Ryan Expressway junction in Chicago, a 25-mile stretch of freeway along 16 municipalities that squeezes in 170,000 vehicles daily.

The state's last flirtation with public-private partnerships involved the ill-fated Illiana Expressway, now shelved.

Widening I-55 is much more viable, thinks Metropolitan Planning Council Vice President Peter Skosey. The MPC opposed the Illiana.

Skosey said there's "tremendous interest" in widening I-55.

"It's an existing corridor, there's existing ridership, the demand is very clear. Exploring tolling as a revenue source is a smart thing to do," he said. "It could be done by the (Illinois) tollway or a private concessionaire.

"It's not building a new road in the middle of unchartered territory. The right of way is there, it exists on the shoulders ... we're not talking about acquiring vast swathes of land."

Transportation expert Steve Schlickman agreed I-55 can easily accommodate extra lanes. "It is a good fit for IDOT's demonstrating the feasibility of managed lanes. I would assume that Pace's bus on shoulder operation would continue to be accommodated," said Schlickman, former chief of UIC's Urban Transportation Center.

But others cautioned that any private sector deals should be subject to scrutiny under the Freedom of Information Act and the public should be protected if the project loses money.

"Illinois taxpayers should not be left holding the financial bag if the toll revenues turn out to be less rosy than forecasted," Environmental Law and Policy Center Executive Director Howard Learner said.

Senate Republican Leader Christine Radogno and House GOP Leader Jim Durkin also backed getting the private sector to finance and operate the project, which needs legislative approval and a buy-in from the Democrats who are feuding with Rauner.

"We're happy to examine a bill," said Steve Brown, spokesman for House Speaker Michael Madigan.

Here's a look at what managed lanes might mean:

- Express toll lane -- drivers pay a toll to use this lane with the promise of a swift trip.
- High occupancy vehicle lane -- a carpool lane that's restricted to carloads of more than just one person.
- High occupancy toll lane -- an express lane for vehicles with more than one person that also can be used by solo drivers willing to pay for the privilege.
- Congestion priced lane -- drivers pay a toll to use this express lane typically during morning and afternoon rush hours. Prices can vary depending on demand.

Other cities that use managed lanes include Minneapolis, San Diego, Houston, Salt Lake City, Baltimore, Denver, Dallas and Fort Lauderdale.

An IDOT survey found that 75 percent of people on the Stevenson drive alone, and 97 percent call traffic congestion disruptive.