



Rauner pushes plan for tolls on I-55

February 4, 2016 By Richard Wronski

Gov. Bruce Rauner's efforts to end the political bottleneck in Springfield have stalled so far, but he might have better luck with a new proposal to ease the chronic traffic jams on the Stevenson Expressway (Interstate 55).

Flanked by state legislators from both parties, Rauner on Thursday announced support for a plan to widen 25 miles of I-55 with so-called "managed lanes." Under the concept known as congestion pricing, these lanes would be tolled, depending on the amount of traffic, and could be used by carpoolers.

Rauner called for exploring a so-called Public Private Partnership, or P3, between the Illinois Department of Transportation and private investors to develop the project. The investors would provide the funding, estimated at \$425 million. In return, the investors would recoup toll revenue for construction, operations and maintenance.

"By using existing resources to leverage private investment, we can build the type of infrastructure that allows Illinois to better compete in the 21st century," Rauner said. "This is an innovative project that will create jobs, improve the region's quality of life and show that Illinois is open for business."

Plans for adding tolled lanes to I-55 are not new. Transportation planners have advocated the managed-lane concept for years. In December, Rauner's transportation secretary, Randy Blankenhorn outlined the project at a public hearing in Countryside.

Still, Rauner's announcement drew immediate praise from officials and experts, who called the idea long overdue.

"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," said Joe Szabo, executive director of the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, which Blankenhorn previously headed.

It's also possible that instead of private investors, the Illinois State Toll Highway Authority could end up being IDOT's partner to finance, build and operate the managed lanes, experts say. Although the Tollway is a state

agency and under Rauner's control, it is separate from IDOT and uses only toll revenue for its projects. Either way, tolling on I-55 would need to be compatible with the Illinois Tollway's I-Pass.

The Tollway is in the midst of its own 15-year, \$12.1 billion expansion and improvement project called Move Illinois. The Tollway's current projects include rebuilding and widening the Jane Addams Tollway (I-90) and construction of the new Elgin-O'Hare tollway.

In a statement, the Tollway on Thursday said it is "committed to working with IDOT wherever necessary" for a "seamless transition from roadway to roadway."

P3s have become more common in states as federal highway funds have dried up. Former Gov. Pat Quinn had pushed hard for a P3 to finance his would-be pet project, the Illiana Toll Road, linking I-55 near Wilmington with I-65 in Indiana. The federal government has since withdrawn its approval for the Illiana.

Rauner's plan prompted a cautious response, however, from Howard Learner, executive director of the Chicago-based Environmental Law and Policy Center, which filed a lawsuit to help block the Illiana.

"When it comes to these types of P3 deals, the devil is in the details," Learner said. "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."

Rauner, who built his personal fortune via a private equity firm, said he believes using a P3 would get the project built more quickly and cheaply than IDOT could on its own. Indeed, experts say the state doesn't have the money for the project at the present time.

The plan calls for adding at least one lane in each direction between I-355, the Veterans Memorial Tollway, near Bolingbrook and the Dan Ryan Expressway (I-90/94) in Chicago. An estimated 170,000 vehicles a day travel this stretch of highway, which is often congested at all hours of the day in either direction.

IDOT has already widened the shoulders of I-55 to accommodate Pace express buses operating during rush hours between the southwest suburbs and downtown Chicago and the West Side Medical District. These buses are allowed to use the shoulders when traffic slows below 35 mph.

Rauner cited a 2011 state law that allows IDOT to build, finance and operate highway projects using P3s. Quinn used this measure to push the Illiana. Rauner and the legislators on hand Thursday urged approval of a resolution in the General Assembly to allow IDOT to move ahead with the P3 process for I-55 and eventually ask investors to submit bids.

Transportation expert and former Regional Transportation Authority Executive Director Steve Schlickman called the Pace buses a valuable service and said it would be beneficial to explore further the feasibility of managed lanes on I-55.

Peter Skosey, executive vice president of the Metropolitan Planning Council, said the managed lane concept on I-55 has been on planners' wish lists for years.

“This is a project we’re quite excited about,” said Skosey, who also serves on CMAP’s board. “This isn’t something that someone just dreamed up. ... There is a regional consensus that this is a needed project.”

With managed lanes, motorists have the choice of paying a toll for less congestion and a quicker commute when needed, Skosey said.

The project could be attractive to private investors, Skosey said, because it would merely be adding a lane to an existing highway. In that regard, it would be unlike the Illiana, which critics said was a potential boondoggle and could have put the state on the hook for billions if not successful.

“This is a pretty bread-and-butter P3,” Skosey said. “There’s a lot of money out there to invest.”

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