

More toll lanes could be coming to Chicago area as highway funds lag

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Chicago-area residents may be seeing more toll roads in the coming years.

Shrinking funds for road repairs and expansion, particularly from gas taxes, means that states are looking at both tolling and private financing to help pay for projects, and Illinois is no exception.

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The Illinois Department of Transportation is waiting for the General Assembly's OK to pursue private financing to build new, tolled lanes on the Stevenson Expressway, or I-55. And the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, which sets funding priorities for the region, last week recommended more use of tolling to pay for highway projects, including the possibility of adding tolled lanes on Interstate 80 and the Eisenhower Expressway, or I-290.

"There must be new revenues," said CMAP executive director Joe Szabo. "There's no free ride."

But before signing a deal to let a private company build toll lanes, governments need to make sure it's in the public's best interest over the long term, transportation experts caution. Governments have to watch out for contracts that could hamper flexibility, the way the Chicago parking meter lease hurts the city's ability to say, create a bike lane where parking is now. Tolls also cannot be so high that free-flowing traffic becomes a privilege only for the well-to-do.

"If you have to pay \$40 to \$50 to get to work that's really hard on people," said Sheila Dunn, spokeswoman for the National Motorists Association, a driver advocacy group. Dunn also warned that tolls could increase prices for goods delivered by truck.

"I hope people wake up and say, 'Hey, this is too much,' " Dunn said.

More tolling in Illinois

The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning raised the issue of more tolls in a draft of its "On to 2050" plan for the Chicago region.

None of these possible toll lanes would happen soon.

The first round of new express toll lanes, also known as "managed lanes," could come on I-55, with construction starting as early as 2020. To combat congestion on the crowded Stevenson, IDOT wants to add new toll lanes in each direction along a 25-mile stretch between I-355 and

I-90/94, to be built by private companies. The state's transportation department wants developers to pay for all or part of construction.

There would still be free lanes on I-55, but the managed lanes would allow drivers to go more quickly if they're willing to pay. Costs for managed lanes may fluctuate based on time of day.

Illinois Department of Transportation Secretary Randy Blankenhorn said the agency has been waiting for two years for a resolution from the Illinois legislature.

The Ike was built over 50 years ago and carries more vehicles than it was designed to handle. To help pay for rebuilding, IDOT is looking at adding a toll lane for single-occupancy cars — but allow carpool and other high-occupancy vehicles to use the lane free — though that project would come after I-55. CMAP recommended tolling the entire road, given the estimated \$2.7 billion cost of the project and the lack of other funding.

Interstate 80 is in “critical need of repair” from Ridge Road to U.S. Route 30 in Will County and the bridge over the Des Plaines River needs to be replaced, CMAP said.

Will County Board Chairman James Moustis said I-80 is congested with trucks, and safety is a concern. The board has asked the Illinois Tollway to study I-80 to see if it could come up with some options.

“I think we should be looking at everything,” Moustis said.

Other sources of revenue are shrinking, including gas tax receipts, Blankenhorn noted. The state fuel tax has not been increased since 1991, while the federal tax hasn't gone up since 1993, so the tax hasn't kept up with inflation. Meanwhile, cars are getting more efficient and there are more electric vehicles on the road, so people are buying less gas.

Illinois Tollway Chairman Bob Schillerstrom said the Tollway is willing to help implement tolling on I-55, I-290 and I-80, if that's what communities want.

“The people who use the roadways, they don't care if it's an IDOT road or a tollway, they just want to know they can safely get from their homes to work and back in the evenings,” Schillerstrom said. “And if we can help to move them along in a quicker, more expeditious fashion and in a safer fashion, we're there to be part of the team.”

Other states and tolls

Similar problems with low funding and high congestion are leading other states to try tolling, or consider it.

New toll roads or toll lanes are opening in Texas, Colorado and Virginia, said Pat Jones, executive director of the International Bridge, Tunnel and Turnpike Association, which represents toll facility owners and operators. Among states considering tolling are Connecticut, Wisconsin and Michigan

Jones said statewide tolling agencies, like the New Jersey Turnpike, were created from the 1930s through the 1950s. Then came the interstate system, with the federal gas tax providing a large share of funding for roads and repairs, but that tax is no longer providing enough money, Jones said.

“In recent years, we’ve returned in some ways to a situation that existed in the 1950s, before the interstate highway system,” Jones said. He said the most growth is being seen in managed lanes.

Adding tolls to formerly free interstates is a “political hot potato,” said transportation expert Steve Schlickman, noting that northeastern Illinois is already one of the most tolled regions of the country. “People are used to a freeway,” he said.

Jones said the argument that freeways are already paid for by taxes ignores changing needs and maintenance.

“Think of a house you might own and the mortgage is paid off, but you’ve got a leaky roof or the water heater died,” Jones said.

Right now, states are limited as to the amount of tolled lanes they can add to interstates, but the Trump administration’s infrastructure proposal looks to lift those restrictions.

“I think they want to leave it to the states and local governments to decide if it’s the right thing to do, and I applaud that,” Blankenhorn said.

Private financing

Tolling allows for private financing, since private companies are not interested in building something that does not bring a return. But these deals have not always worked out.

An example is the public-private deal to ease congestion on California’s State Route 91. The new toll lanes were a success at first, but the agreement kept the state from adding a lane and improving public transit. Eventually, the Orange County Transportation Authority, a government agency, bought the toll lanes.

A privately developed toll road in Texas went into bankruptcy, and the Indiana Toll Road is currently facing debt problems, according to published reports.

One thing the public needs to watch out for in toll road deals is how quickly tolls can rise, said David Besanko, professor at the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University.

“The public needs to be aware of what the formula is and that the formulas are based on something reasonable,” Besanko said. There also needs to be clarity up front about who has responsibility if the private entity runs into financial problems, and how to handle ongoing maintenance, he said.

“You have to make sure the public sector and taxpayers aren’t taking an undue share of the risk,” said Audrey Wennink, transportation director at the Metropolitan Planning Council, a

Chicago-based public policy research group.

Transportation song quiz

Last week's song was about a place of arrivals and departures — recorded by this group before its hits about turning and tambourines. It is "The Airport Song" by The Byrds. Gwen Ogi of Skokie was first with the right answer.

This week's song is named for a vehicle often seen on city streets, but the song is about what's gone missing. What is it, and who did it? The first person with the right answer gets a Tribune Tower guidebook, and glory.

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