

Our opinion: No tolls? No money to fix I-80

by **Denny Bonavita**

Sunday's edition led off with a story out of Clarion, where U.S. Rep. Glenn Thompson and business owners met to voice their opposition to Gov. Ed Rendell's plan to start charging tolls to drivers of vehicles that travel along Interstate 80.

Well, fine. We're not thrilled with the I-80 tolls idea either.

Sunday's story included some weighty arguments against tolling I-80 - and some hogwash. "Tolling existing interstates that were constructed using federal funds is nothing more than a double tax on users who already pay for the road," Thompson claimed.

That's hogwash.

The road was built more than 50 years ago. Many of the people whose taxes paid for it then are dead. So, too, is the road, in terms of its bridges and many of its stretches. I-80 has endured more than its planned share of heavy truck traffic, and it needs major reconstruction.

But of course, neither the federal government nor the state government set aside money for that reconstruction, even though the need for it was obvious.

So now, we have to pay - not for building I-80, but for rebuilding a worn-out road, a new project. So we can pay for it using tolls, or using the gasoline tax, federal or state.

That brings us to the second specious argument, one voiced by several business owners who cited feared costs of \$100,000 per year or more if tolls are imposed along I-80.

That argument, while not exactly hogwash, is incomplete.

Since repairs to I-80 are needed, let's suggest 10 cents per gallon in increased gasoline taxes to pay for them.

Then let's hear the arguments: For example, \$100,000 per year if tolls are imposed, vs. \$160,000 per year - or \$60,000 per year? - if a gasoline tax is used to finance the work.

As we understand it, the issue is not whether to raise more millions or not. The issue is whether to raise more millions - or risk imposing weight limits that will not allow trucks to use bridges on some stretches of I-80. Weight limits mean every truck uses secondary roads, whereas tolls mean some do and some don't.

When the issue of tolls along I-80 first surfaced two years ago, we resigned ourselves to paying more money to use motor vehicles, because I-80 needs to be renovated, and mass transit systems in big cities need to be paid for.

The question, then, is not whether to impose tolls on I-80 drivers.

The question, rather, is what tax is likely to do what needs to be done with the least harm to taxpayers and businesses?

And there is another question: When will state government shake off the shackles of too-powerful mass transit unions, and reduce costs for those systems to reasonable and affordable levels that do not require highway tolls for subsidies?