

## **Pennsylvania needs Interstate 80 toll**

**by David Patti**

Pennsylvania needs a sustained funding source to promote economic growth and make our roads and bridges safer. Our roads are consistently rated among the poorest in the nation.

Pennsylvania has thousands of bridges that have been rated "structurally deficient" by engineers because of their age and heavy use.

Our commerce and economic lifeblood is traveling these roads and bridges. More importantly, so are our families.

Pennsylvania's General Assembly approved a broad transportation funding plan in 2007 -- Act 44. But part of that law is on hold because the federal government did not approve a plan to institute tolling along Interstate 80 to be matched by significantly increased tolls for motorists on the Pennsylvania Turnpike.

For more than a half-century, funding for road and bridge construction and maintenance has come from federal and state gas taxes collected at the pump.

The first 50 cents per gallon you pay at the pump are federal and state taxes. This has been viewed as a "user fee" -- those who drive more, pay more for their use of the roads.

Despite the high tax rate, however, gas-tax revenues are declining. More fuel-efficient vehicles and the advent of vehicles that use alternative roads mean highways and bridges are getting use with lower or no payment for that use.

Political leaders, however, are reluctant to vote to increase the gas tax rate to replace lost revenues. President Barack Obama said of a proposed gasoline tax hike, "putting additional burdens on American families right now, I think, is a mistake." State political leaders share the view that voting for a tax increase now would cost them at the polls -- regardless of the merits of tax purposes.

Gov. Rendell and some Pennsylvania lawmakers considered a plan to lease the Pennsylvania Turnpike to a private operator with the intent of taking a large up-front payment and investing it in the stock market to spend the dividends and earnings. The General Assembly rejected the plan.

As we know now, billions would have been lost when equity markets collapsed. There is a role for private highway builders and operators who recoup their outlays in tolls -- especially in new construction -- but the plan put forth was unworkable.

The argument for tolling interstate highways such as I-80 is that Pennsylvania can collect revenues from vehicles that are passing through the commonwealth but otherwise not contributing to the capacity and maintenance needs of our highways.

When the federal government built the interstates in the 1950s it was decreed that they should not be tolled. (Pre-existing toll roads incorporated into the interstate system, such as the Pennsylvania Turnpike, were grandfathered.) A subsequent law allowed for three "experimental" tolling programs. I-80 would be the third.

Consideration is now being given in Washington to a proposal to empower states to toll any interstates within their boundaries as long as those funds are used for highway maintenance. It's a fair and workable option. If interstate tolls are used for the maintenance and improvement of our main highways and their connectors, a reasonable fuel or miles-driven tax can be devoted to maintenance of secondary roads.

While tolls might not be popular, most users of toll roads perceive the fair exchange of a daily fee for the safety, security and value of a well-maintained and heavily patrolled road. Counting the turnpike, Pennsylvania has 1,758 miles of interstate highways. (I have been driving the Pennsylvania Turnpike at least 80 miles almost every work day for most of the last 24 years. I have paid my fair share of those tolls.)

With more than 44,000 miles of state-maintained roads in Pennsylvania and more than 25,000 state-maintained bridges, doing nothing is not an option.

Truckers and residents along Pennsylvania's much more populous southern corridor are already paying increased Pennsylvania Turnpike tolls, without rebates or strategic tolling locations, by the way. It's unfair and unrealistic to think they will make up the full funding shortfall. All of Pennsylvania must help pay for the highway and bridge maintenance we so desperately need.

Our safety and future economic development growth demand we implement all of Act 44 and close the highway maintenance shortfall.

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