

Editorial: Taking its Toll

A new report that claims tolls would hurt the economy of the I-80 corridor shouldn't derail Pennsylvania's effort to win federal approval to do that.

Two years ago, the legislature approved tolling I-80 to help pay for transportation costs. But opponents of the plan recently aired a study that they are using to support their concerns.

The report, produced by an associate economics professor at Grove City College, concluded that tolls would harm businesses in that region, including manufacturers and farms. It also contended that accidents on other roads might increase as drivers use them to avoid the tolls.

State transportation officials should address those concerns in their own economic impact study, which will be completed next month. If there are ways to mitigate potential problems, such as improving alternate roads or adjusting the distances between toll booths, those options certainly should be pursued.

But the objections raised should not become a death knell for tolls on I-80. The plan remains a sensible proposal for raising money for the state's transportation needs. Without it, state funding for roads, bridges, and mass transit would be cut in half by next July.

Turnpike officials are planning to resubmit their application for tolls on I-80 to the Federal Highway Administration within the next few weeks. The federal agency turned down the bid in September 2008. Among other issues, the FHWA said the state needed to show that toll money from I-80 would be used only for improvements on that highway.

The state's original plan had been to use some of the toll money for other highway needs, but the proposal certainly didn't shortchange I-80. It called for spending \$250 million per year for 10 years on capital improvements for the interstate. PennDOT currently spends about \$60 million per year on I-80.

A lingering objection to tolling I-80 is the mistaken belief that the money would pay for mass transit in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. It's not true. Act 44 does provide funding for 73 transit agencies around the state, from Centre County to SEPTA. But that money comes from Turnpike tolls, two-thirds of which are collected around Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and Harrisburg.

Rejecting the I-80 toll plan would be a huge setback for transportation statewide. The Turnpike Commission's payments to PennDOT would be cut from \$900 million to \$450 million, and contributions for capital improvements would be eliminated.

That scenario would send state legislators scrambling once again to fund the state's rising transportation demands - in an election year. Given the recently concluded budget fiasco, the prospects of raising new revenue for transportation next year would be dim.

The state's federal representatives should be working together on behalf of the tolling plan.
