

Editorial: Time to toll I-80

Given the eight-week stalemate over the Pennsylvania budget, Harrisburg might be the last place to look for government officials willing to head off a fiscal problem before it becomes a full-blown crisis.

Just maybe, though, things will be different where it comes to meeting the critical need for funding of the state's highways, bridges, and mass transit.

Indeed, PennDot highway officials, Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission financial experts, and Philadelphia transit-agency executives have begun to sound the alarm over a \$450 million transportation revenue shortfall due to hit next summer.

When state lawmakers passed a measure in 2007 designed to provide \$900 million a year for transportation, they expected to raise half the funds from new tolls on Interstate 80.

Thanks to borrowing by the Turnpike Commission, transportation project funding has been flowing already: \$500 million for roads and bridges, and \$400 million for transit this year.

But a new revenue source is needed to sustain these infrastructure investments beyond July 2010. It could be the I-80 tolls or a Plan B: perhaps a more broad-based gas tax hike or other transportation-related levy.

For his part, Gov. Rendell hoped to fund Act 44 by leasing out the turnpike to a private operator, then drawing on the investment of the lease proceeds. Fortunately, that financially risky plan collapsed well before Wall Street's woes quashed Rendell's rosy prediction of success.

For now, the tolling of I-80 is a middle-of-the-road option. Trouble is, the state has yet to win federal approval to put up toll booths along the 311 miles of I-80.

Too much time has been allowed to elapse since an initial push for federal permission failed in late 2007. So it's welcome news that turnpike and PennDot officials plan to make another stab at getting the go-ahead for I-80 tolls.

A change of administrations in Washington could result in a warmer reception. Certainly, President Obama has made a priority of investing in the nation's infrastructure - with high-speed rail and transit, in general, a key focus.

The resistance to I-80 tolls remains strong across the state's northern tier from members of Congress and businessmen who contend the tolls would cripple the local economy. But those fears still seem exaggerated.

Tolls would be spaced widely so that local motorists would travel toll-free. As for the risk that truck traffic would take another east-west route - particularly heading to and from the New York and New Jersey port - it's either I-80 or the turnpike.

But failing to plug the fiscal hole in Act 44 would mean backsliding after two years of progressive funding for transportation across the state.

For thousands of Philadelphia transit users, in particular, the loss of \$120 million a year by SEPTA could scuttle key capital projects like a smart-card fare system or the makeover of the shabby City Hall subway station.

So transit riders and motorists alike need to put their elected officials in Harrisburg on notice: Even while the budget mess is being resolved, officials need to do the responsible thing and map out a route to keep transportation funding rolling along.
