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Roadblock to funding highways

FHA must rethink its ruling on Pa.'s I-80 tolls - a practical solution to a national dilemma.

Dan McNichol

- > has written extensively on the American highway system
- > The Federal Highway Administration's decision to block the addition of toll booths to Pennsylvania's piece of Interstate 80 leaves the state - and the rest of the nation - with some ugly transportation funding choices.
- > The recent decision also contradicts the agency's own recommendations. With the Federal Highway Trust Fund running on fumes, the highway administration encouraged states to develop alternative, creative transportation funding plans. One of those recommended solutions: Add tolls to stretches of the interstate system.
- > The decision not to practice what it preaches now has some special interests in Harrisburg clucking about a lease of the Pennsylvania Turnpike.
- > The good news for Pennsylvania is that the majority of state lawmakers would rather catch an untreatable disease than approve a lease of the Pennsylvania Turnpike, as has been proposed. Besides the unsettling notion of turning over one of Pennsylvania's most valuable assets to a foreign company, lawmakers realize that the deal makes no economic sense.
- > Not only is the road worth a lot more than the \$12.8 billion bid by a Spanish-led consortium, but it's also worth more in the hands of the Turnpike Commission - which, by the way, has done an outstanding job of maintaining it, according to independent audits.
- > The legislature and Gov. Rendell found a better way to go last year when they approved Act 44, which calls for tolling I-80. Such a plan would generate \$116 billion over 50 years for road and bridge maintenance - billions more than a turnpike lease. The new funds would also rebuild I-80, which truckers rank as one of the most damaged parts of the interstate system.
- > The toll plan stems from a 10-year-old amendment to the federal transportation funding law. Congress inserted language in the act that allowed for three pilot projects in which states would

toll segments of the interstate system.

> Congress knew even then that the Highway Trust Fund, financed by the federal gas tax, was headed for bankruptcy. Today's high oil prices are further straining the fund: They increase costs for road materials and operating machinery, car and truck manufacturers are building more fuel-efficient cars, and, for the first time, motorists are actually driving fewer miles.

> Fewer miles and more miles per gallon add up to lower tax revenue. Combine that with higher maintenance costs, and you end up with both a funding deficit and an infrastructure deficit. The House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee estimates that the highway fund will fall \$4.3 billion short in 2009. And it could begin running a deficit as early as the end of this month.

> Pennsylvania can still lead the nation toward a practical solution to a national dilemma.

> In the 1790s, the state relied on tolling dollars to build the Lancaster Turnpike, one of the nation's first paved highways. In the mid-1880s, the commonwealth built its share of the National Road, the nation's first interstate highway, by allowing the Army Corps of Engineers to build toll houses to collect revenue. And in 1940, the Pennsylvania Turnpike became the first superhighway in U.S. history, helping to modernize the nation.


> It's time to revisit our past so our roads can send us into the future. The Federal Highway Administration needs to reverse its decision.

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