

## Local report looks at tolls for financing road projects

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Some highway advocates have touted tolls as the best hope for getting projects built. That sentiment prompted the commission to join last year with state and federal transportation agencies in requesting the toll study.

Commuters will glimpse the future cost of driving when a long-awaited study on using tolls to pay for major road projects is released this week by the Hampton Roads Planning District Commission.

The study aims to answer what it will cost people to drive on some of the region's most sought-after new highways, bridges and tunnels in a time of dwindling state money for road building but increasing demand for roads.

"I hope this study is our salvation because we don't have any other salvation right now," said Harry T. Lester, who represents Virginia Beach on the Commonwealth Transportation Board.

Hampton Roads voters in 2002 defeated a referendum that would have raised sales taxes locally to pay for major road projects. And the General Assembly earlier this year rejected proposals to rejuvenate road-building with new tax money.

With those setbacks, some highway advocates have touted tolls as the best hope for getting projects built. That sentiment prompted the commission to join last year with state and federal transportation agencies in requesting the toll study.

Lester said he hopes the report "says we can build all of these projects with tolls because if it does not, then I don't know where all that money will come from." But he said that he also is concerned that commuters will have "sticker shock" when they see the proposed tolls on some projects.

Up to this point, regional planners have taken a rough stab at possible tolls, which could only be imposed after lengthy reviews by state and federal authorities. The planning district commission has said that one-way trips across new or improved stretches of local interstate could range from \$1.50 to \$9.

The study, to be released Wednesday, will focus largely on projects that regional road planners have said are needed to address rush-hour congestion. All were part of the 2002 referendum. Among them are the massive "third crossing" of Hampton Roads as well as the Southeastern Parkway and Greenbelt across central Chesapeake and Virginia Beach.

Combined, the projects in the study are projected to cost at least \$7.7 billion, and it could be a decade or more before any of them is built. Because it is not clear if tolls alone could pay for them, the study also will consider how much additional revenue, such as an increase in the gasoline tax, would be needed to help underwrite the work.

Transportation planners have long said that certain roads – such as planned improvements to U.S. 460 – will likely not generate enough daily traffic for tolls to pay the entire cost.

Other projects, like the third crossing, are likely to be so expensive that a combination of tolls and new state revenue will be needed to build them, experts have said. A recent unsolicited proposal

by a consortium of companies to build the estimated \$4.7 billion crossing project called for at least \$2 billion in public investment for that project alone. The remainder would be paid back with tolls, under that proposal.

Business and civic leaders have called for small increases in gasoline and sales taxes to advance local road projects, but many politicians won seats in the General Assembly promising to cut taxes – not raise them.

Whether the toll study reignites debate about how to build major projects depends largely upon how it is first received by commission members from the 16 cities and counties of Hampton Roads – and then by members of the General Assembly.

Del. Leo Wardrup, a Virginia Beach Republican who chairs the House Transportation Committee, said he opposes an increase in gas taxes but conceded that some form of additional revenue besides tolls will be needed to address transportation problems.

"It's tough for a Republican like me to say this, but we are going to have to pay for the privilege of driving our cars," Wardrup said.

While tolls may be the easiest answer in the search for money to build roads, they do have drawbacks.

A major project financed through tolls is about twice as expensive as one paid for from taxes, studies by the local planning commission have shown. That's because toll-road builders must take on 10 years or more of debt during design or construction. With so long a wait before toll revenues come in, bondholders for such projects expect to be generously rewarded.

Art Collins, the commission's executive director, said he expects the study by Pittsburgh-based Michael Baker Corp. to confirm "that tolls are the most expensive way of funding these needed facilities."

Perhaps the safest bet about the study is that it will not predict any easing in the pressure to build roads.

Local vehicle registrations surged to an all-time high of 281,000 in South Hampton Roads last year, up from about 230,000 in 1999, according to the Virginia Department of Motor Vehicles.

That's translating into more cars and trucks crowding the highways at rush hours, with most of them occupied by one person, planning commission studies have shown.

Still more studies from the commission are projecting that rush-hour travel speed on Interstate 64 west of I-264 could approach 25 mph in the next decade, slowing from the 53 mph that is typical today.