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Turnpike toll hike for non-NH E-ZPass holders attracts only support

Kevin Landrigan, The New Hampshire Union Leader, Manchester

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A proposed doubling of turnpike toll rates for non-New Hampshire E-ZPass users coasted through its first House public hearing without any opposition Tuesday.

Gov. Kelly Ayotte's opposition to the idea remains a significant obstacle to it becoming a reality, however.

Leaders in road construction, engineering and commuter bus fields all urged the House Public Works and Highways Committee to endorse the Senate-passed proposal (SB 627) that would raise an estimated \$53 million a year.

State Sen. David Watters, D-Dover, said the Executive Council handed the Legislature a 10-year highway program that was \$400 million under-financed and it's up to lawmakers to seize this one-time authority to alter turnpike toll rates.

"This is our responsibility. I have never understood since the Legislature raises revenue why we have not been doing this," Watters said. "It is on us, the rubber hits the road, let's get the job done."

The Road Information Program (TRIP), a Washington-based, nonpartisan transportation policy think tank, just issued a report detailing the 25 most critical projects in New Hampshire that won't be financed without additional revenue.

Those include the reconstruction of Exits 6 and 7 on Interstate 293 in Manchester (\$280 million) and the widening of I-93 and its intersection with I-89 in Concord and Bow (\$780 million)

"Without additional investment, needed transportation projects in New Hampshire will be left stranded on the drawing board and road and bridge conditions will deteriorate," Dave Kearby, TRIP's executive director, said in a statement.

"A well-maintained and well-funded transportation system is essential to keep New Hampshire residents, visitors and businesses moving in a positive direction."

State Transportation Commissioner David Rodrigue said his agency was neutral on the bill but he said higher turnpike toll revenue could be claimed as "toll credits" that the state DOT can use as a federal match to complete the financing of many state highway and bridge projects that are off the interstate system.

Without a toll increase, the state will run out of the turnpike toll credits in 2034, he said.

As proposed, 90 days after the bill is signed it would lead to the following rates for non-residents who lack a New Hampshire E-ZPass:

- Bedford and Hooksett tolls on F.E. Everett Turnpike: \$1 to \$2.
- Interstate 95 toll in Hampton: \$2 to \$4.
- Spaulding Turnpike tolls in Dover and Rochester: 75 cents to \$1.50.

Non-residents can purchase a New Hampshire E-ZPass transponder.

If approved, this would be the first turnpike system-wide toll increase in 19 years.

While state law gives the governor and the council the power to set toll rates, only the Legislature can adopt bills to set the gasoline tax rate along with other motor vehicle fees that help finance state highway projects.

New Hampshire motorists would pay the higher toll rates if they lacked an E-ZPass transponder.

The bill directs the Department of Transportation to give one for free to any resident that seeks one for seven months after the bill is signed.

State officials said about 85% of cars and trucks registered in the state already have an E-ZPass.

All other New England states and New York have higher toll charges for those who don't have an E-ZPass from that state, said James Jalbert, president of C&J Bus Lines, which operates buses that bring passengers from the Seacoast to Boston and New York City.

"What I am worried about is we are going to start running out of money and the opportunity to maintain our existing infrastructure and keep up with expansion in this state is quickly going to fall by the wayside," Jalbert said.

Ayotte initially came out in opposition to the increase in rates when it was proposed for all motorists in the state.

After a Senate committee limited it to non-New Hampshire E-ZPass customers, she still vowed to reject it.

"I implore you to support this," Jalbert said. "I urge you to push the governor to do the right thing. This is a no-lose situation in New Hampshire."

Amy Charbonneau with Continental Paving of Londonderry said without the additional revenue the state will lose its reputation for having a good interstate network.

"The highways are going to fall apart. We can't maintain what we have. Our roads are much better than Massachusetts. We don't want to ever go there," Charbonneau said.

What's Next: The House panel is expected to make a recommendation on the bill in the next few weeks.

Outlook: Still unclear. The committee is likely to endorse the toll increase in some form, but House GOP leaders in the face of Ayotte's opposition have yet to take a position on it. klandrigan@unionleader.com