

Tolls return as road building solution

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[By Paul Snyder](#)

A coalition of state organizations wants tolls to pay for road construction.

But recommendations and reports are not enough to drum up legislative support.

"I'd want to see the plans for where they would go and how they would be used," said [state Rep. Christine Sinicki](#), D-Milwaukee, a member of the [Assembly Committee on Transportation](#). "I want to make sure what we're looking at is practical and feasible."

The [Wisconsin Transportation Builders Association](#), a member of the Wisconsin Way coalition that called for the tolls, has completed a study of national tolling averages and state traffic counts that revealed tolling could net Wisconsin up to \$800 million annually, said Kevin Traas, WTBA's director of transportation policy and finance. But the organization has not shared those numbers with the state Legislature.

"We've just calculated it internally," he said. "If we were going to do it properly, we'd want our numbers to be a little more precise and as part of a full formal study."

Traas said before that happens, lawmakers need to show they are willing to discuss tolls. They also must assure taxpayers money raised for transportation will not be diverted for other purposes, he said.

To spark that discussion, Wisconsin Way, which also includes the Transportation Development Association of Wisconsin, produced the [Blueprint for Change](#). The blueprint, which was released Friday, is a 52-page document recommending changes to relieve the state's heavy reliance on property taxes.

Tolls on Wisconsin's interstate highways were part of that blueprint.

"Our reliance on a gas tax and registration fees isn't sustainable," said TDA Executive Director Craig Thompson. "We're not saying all the ideas in the blueprint are exactly what needs to happen, but I think as lawmakers are confronted with different options, tolling starts to look a lot more like a real ongoing, significant resource for transportation."

Thompson acknowledged tolls are a contentious political issue, and even with the blueprint, convincing lawmakers will "undoubtedly be difficult."

Adding to the difficulty is a federal law requiring federal approval of tolls on an interstate system. That typically stops toll discussions in Wisconsin, said state Rep. Jeff Stone, R-Greendale, a member of the Assembly Committee on Transportation.

"That's the real challenge," he said. "If we can't get that, we're not going anywhere."

But Stone said federal gas tax payouts to Wisconsin are dwindling, and tolls could be the fairest way to generate more transportation money. He echoed Sinicki's request for details.

"It is something we have to take a look at," he said. "I just don't know that tolling is the option we need."

The goal of the blueprint is to start the discussion, said WTBA Executive Director Pat Goss. He said a tolling system in Wisconsin would be like Illinois' open-road tolling system and would be used throughout the state.

It's too soon, Goss said, for details of how many tolls there would be and where they would go. For now, he said, lawmakers need to realize the state cannot afford to maintain the roads it has and Wisconsin must find a new way to pay.

"And just saying 'no' isn't acceptable," he said. "We need other ideas. For me to say, 'We're not going to raise user fees,' then I need to be able to answer how we're going to pay for this system. So the question is: If not tolling, then what?"