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## Editorial: Toll roads worth discussing

Gov. Jim Doyle recently opened a sliver of daylight between his longstanding objection to toll roads and the reality that an alternative may be needed to replace diminishing gas tax revenues. He remains opposed, but admits that could change.

Like Doyle, we have reservations about toll roads, and at this moment couldn't say 'yea' or 'nay' to their creation. But it's a discussion Wisconsin should consider in earnest — sooner than later. For certain it's a subject that will require revisions in federal law and reasoned analysis.

The gasoline tax is the largest component of the state's transportation fund and there are factors that suggest it will not be able to meet the state's long-term transportation needs.

Between higher gas prices and the recession, we aren't driving as much and therefore not generating the tax dollars needed for some of the major projects being considered. Meanwhile, as motorists turn to vehicles with better gas mileage and look at alternative fuels and electric cars — good things to be sure — reliance on the gas tax could take another whammy.

Whether there is an increase in the gasoline tax — establishment of toll system or some other method of generating revenue — those funds should only be used for transportation.

The most likely candidates for a toll system would be the interstate highways — I-43, I-90, I-94 and I-39 — and presumably the section of U.S. 41 designated for future interstate status. Federal law would need to be amended to allow tolls on these interstate highways. Those revisions could occur with the highway reauthorization bill Congress is scheduled to write in September.

The issue, which is already generating debate through the country, will be raised in mid-April when the Transportation Development Association of Wisconsin meets with the state's Congressional delegation.

"We believe that it should be an option that is on the table, and when we go to Washington we're going to make that case," Executive Director Craig Thompson told the Green Bay Press-Gazette. "We're not wed to the premise that there have to be tolls. But there's no disputing the facts that it costs money to maintain and fix the transportation system. And that it is essential to economic development."

In the not-so-distant future, if we don't raise funds through tolls, we may need to raise the federal and state gasoline taxes and look at other options. For example, some are now touting a tax based upon miles driven.

Some proponents will argue that tolls represent user fees and put the cost of maintaining these highways squarely on the shoulders of motorists who use them. And they will claim that in a tourist destination such as Wisconsin, tolls allow the state to raise funds from out-of-state motorists. We do, after all, pay Illinois tolls when we drive through that fair state.

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Opponents will say toll roads are monopolistic and place an unfair burden upon the poor and the middle class.

Even while maintaining a safe distance from the contentious issue — it's at least five years in the future — Doyle acknowledges that one of his main objections to toll roads, the long lines at tollbooths, is being resolved through technological advancements such as the I-pass.

Are tolls the right direction for Wisconsin?

It's too soon to tell, but not too soon to begin asking.