

Doyle is open to tolls to help fund roads

By Larry Sandler and Tom Held of the Journal Sentinel

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Gov. Jim Doyle signaled for the first time Wednesday that he would be open to charging tolls on Wisconsin highways, possibly for express lanes, as the state seeks to replace falling gas tax revenue in the years ahead.

"I hate the idea of tolls," but the state must find new ways to pay for roads and other transportation, Doyle told Journal Sentinel editors and writers.

Although the governor did not specifically advocate tolls, even entertaining the concept is a sharp turnaround from his 2003 vow that "as long as I am governor, we will not have toll roads in Wisconsin."

Doyle also said unofficial cost estimates for rebuilding the Zoo Interchange in western Milwaukee County are "more than anyone ever expected." He declined to provide a figure, other than to say the price tag would be larger than the \$810 million Marquette Interchange project downtown.

The governor spoke the day after he unveiled a 2009-'11 state budget that would shut down dozens of state offices and raise taxes by \$1.4 billion to help close a \$5.7 billion gap between revenue and spending projections.

Among those tax increases would be a new \$272 million tax on oil company profits, which the corporations would be forbidden from passing along to their customers. Asked how he would balance the budget if the courts struck down the oil company tax, Doyle said he would deal with that question if he faced it.

But Doyle went on to say that state officials must open a three- to five-year debate on transportation funding. The state's transportation infrastructure needs are "enormously more expensive" than current revenue streams can cover, he said.

The state's transportation fund now depends largely on the gas tax, and to a lesser extent on vehicle registration and driver's license fees. But a combination of high gas prices and the recession has cut driving, and more emphasis on alternative fuels will continue to depress gas tax revenues, Doyle said. The state raised the vehicle registration fee from \$55 to \$75 last year but can't do that every year, he said.

Still, Doyle said he wanted to preserve the principle of highway users paying for highways, and tolls would be one way to do that.

Advances in technology mean the state could charge tolls without erecting toll booths, Doyle said. In Illinois, for example, many drivers have an electronic transponder, or I-PASS, on their cars to automatically deduct tolls from accounts the motorists have set up with the state tollway authority.

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At least six states - Minnesota, California, Colorado, Florida, Texas and toll) lanes, where drivers / Washington - have set up HOT (high-occupancy without passengers can pay to share a lane that buses and car-poolers use for free. Electronically collected tolls, sometimes rising in rush hours, allow those solo drivers to avoid traffic congestion at a price. Doyle said that idea "makes some sense," particularly for the rebuilt I-94, which will be widened from six to eight lanes.

With Wednesday's comments, the governor indicated his willingness to listen to arguments that have long been advanced by the Transportation Development Association and other business groups, and by the Reason Foundation, a libertarian think tank. Former legislator Kevin Soucie has joined Reason Foundation founder Robert Poole in producing studies outlining how tolls could pay for freeway work here.

In 2003, Doyle's transportation secretary, Frank Busalacchi, told a legislative committee that tolls shouldn't be ruled out as a way to pay for rebuilding southeastern Wisconsin freeways. But the next day, Doyle publicly slapped down Busalacchi by issuing his no-toll-roads declaration.

Craig Thompson, the transportation association's executive director, called Doyle's change a positive development toward recognizing tolls as a viable option.

Previous toll proposals also have been doomed by opposition from the Legislature and the public.

But Thompson said he believed the anti-toll attitudes in Wisconsin have been changing because of the demands for funding to maintain roads and add transit options. Plus, the technology has improved to avoid "requiring people to stop and throw money into a bucket," he said.

Mark O'Connell, executive director of the Wisconsin Counties Association, added: "Any time that we unilaterally take an option off the table, I think that's shortsighted. I don't think we should take any option off the table at all. Previously in the state, we wouldn't even discuss" tolls.

By contrast, Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett said, "We are still missing the fundamental point. We have to have a better balance between local road maintenance and state highway expansion. I'm certainly not excited about any type of toll roads for state highway expansion without addressing the fundamental issue of how we pay for local road maintenance."

Milwaukee County Executive Scott Walker said he is generally opposed to tolls, which he considers "a huge deterrent" to tourism. But Walker said the HOT lane concept is worth discussing, because it gives motorists a choice.

Interchange project

The limitations of the state's transportation fund are part of the reason why Doyle's budget would slow down work on the Zoo Interchange, the state's busiest freeway crossroads.

Preliminary work was to begin in 2012, but the governor said he's no longer certain the state can afford to start that project while reconstruction is still under way on I-94 from Milwaukee's south side to the Illinois state line. The interchange project was originally supposed to follow the I-94 job, which runs through 2016, but Doyle had moved up the interchange timeline under pressure from west suburban forces.

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Doyle's budget provides \$20 million to continue engineering and design work on the Zoo Interchange, about one-tenth of what the state Department of Transportation requested.

By contrast, the 2007-'09 budget allocated more than \$240 million for similar work to make the I-94 reconstruction ready for bulldozers this spring. Doyle said the interchange engineering would determine the project's start date.

State Sen. Ted Kanavas (R-Brookfield) denounced the delay, saying, "Here's a governor who has proclaimed time and again how important the Zoo Interchange is to him and his administration, then guts it in his budget." Kanavas has tried unsuccessfully to move the interchange work ahead of the I-94 project.