Connecticut Legislative Update
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Issues Update: Highway Tolls

Last Wednesday the Transportation Committee passed three bills that pave the way for implementing a comprehensive system of electronic tolling in Connecticut. SB 423, HB 7202 and HB 7280—which broadly outline the process but leave out details about cost, frequency and location of gantries—all passed 23-12 along party lines.

The Senate bill would require the General Assembly vote twice on tolling: this year on enabling the legislation and once more on the final plan. Versions favored by the House Democrats and the governor’s office, however, would require hearings on the final plan be developed by the DOT and reviewed by the FHWA, which would identify the location and pricing of the tolling gantries. They do not require a second vote by the General Assembly.

Though the Governor campaigned on a heavy truck-only toll scheme, he has since offered another plan to toll all vehicles. The Lamont administration has estimated that truck-only tolling would bring in about $200 million per year, while its Modified Congestion Mitigation Tolling Proposal—which would toll all vehicles—has a net revenue potential of up to $800 million annually. About 30 percent of these profits would come from out-of-state drivers. Fees would be collected by an EZ-pass system, and bills mailed out to vehicle owners whose license plates were photographed at overhead gantries.

Under all three bills, tolling gantries would be implemented on the Merritt Parkway and Interstates 84, 91 and 95, the highways most used by both in-state and out-of-state drivers. Some estimates claim the average cost to Connecticut commuters will be $600 a year. If that number is correct, residents will have less disposable income to purchase goods or spend elsewhere in the economy.

By implementing a wide-scale toll scheme in a geographically small state, trucking companies that distribute materials will in turn raise their rates to deliver to stores, and those costs will be passed directly on to consumers. The average cost of materials is sure to rise. Based on environmental and social-impact studies required by federal highway officials, tolls would likely not be implemented before 2023.

The debate Wednesday in committee posed the larger question of whether tolls are the only way to improve an issue that both parties agree on: the desperate need to address the state’s aging transportation infrastructure and failing statewide highway system that, in many areas, is far over capacity and far beyond its expiration date.

House Minority Leader Themis Klarides, R-Derby, and Senate Minority Leader Len Fasano, R-North Haven, testified before the committee in opposition to tolling, urging the legislature to instead dedicate a larger percentage of state borrowing to transportation projects.

While the Republican minority in the legislature is opposed to tolls, passage of the bills falls on a Democratic legislative majority and a Democratic governor. If one of the tolls bills does pass this year, it will certainly prove to be a wedge issue in the 2020 election.

Questions?
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