

Big hike in tolls for Pike looming

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\$5 rise at tunnels is one possibility \$1 jump posed for elsewhere

By Noah Bierman, Globe Staff | September 26, 2008

STURBRIDGE - Massachusetts Turnpike Authority officials, declaring "there's no tooth fairy" to rescue the beleaguered agency, debated a menu of steep toll hikes yesterday and appeared resigned about passing a price hike in the near future.

In fact, the biggest point of contention was not whether a hike is likely, but when it would be imposed.

While some top officials at yesterday's monthly board meeting held out hope that an increase could be averted, the board appeared to have the support of the majority of its members to raise tolls enough to reap at least \$78 million more a year from tollbooths and tunnels near Boston and another \$12 million a year on the western portions of the toll road.

That could mean some combination of increases as high as \$1 at the Weston and Allston-Brighton tollbooths, where tolls are currently \$1.25, or as much as \$5 at the Sumner and Ted Williams tunnels, where tolls are now \$3.50. Most likely, drivers would face a blend of those options, like an increase of 50 cents at the booths and \$2.50 at the tunnels. In addition, a majority of board members said they wanted to reinstate tolls for passenger cars on the western turnpike, Exits 1 through 6, and at West Newton - both tolls were eliminated in 1996.

Commuters, already burdened by high gas prices and a floundering economy, greeted the prospects with angry sighs when interviewed at the Natick travel plaza yesterday.

"The economy is just horrible, so any increase would be hard," said Randy Carpenter, 49, a salesman from Hudson who uses the toll road three times a week. "It would change the quality of life, but people have to use the Pike."

The most contentious question yesterday was how soon to take a vote.

The board's four members were split evenly on a motion to take the imminent vote, leaving the timing unresolved. But one of the members who chose to delay a vote, saying he did not want to box the board in, sounded resigned to an increase.

"There's no tooth fairy," said board member Michael P. Angelini. "We're going to have to get some revenue from [tolling] the road."

The board has sole authority to set tolls and is not dependent on the Legislature to approve them.

Alan LeBovidge, executive director of the Turnpike Authority, and Bernard Cohen, transportation secretary and chairman of the turnpike board, said they were continuing to meet with legislators in hopes of finding an alternative, including a larger subsidy to cover the hefty expenses related to the Big Dig. But the state has been struggling with declining revenues and is facing its own budget shortfalls.

The national problems with credit markets could make the pain sharper for turnpike drivers. The authority's financial advisers told board members yesterday that any hopes of refinancing a troubled investment that could cost \$2 million per month beginning in January have been stalled because the authority cannot get a loan with favorable terms.

Board members Judy Pagliuca and Mary Z. Connaughton said they were worried that unless the board passes

a toll hike soon, the authority's credit rating could deteriorate further, putting it at risk of owing another \$30 million on one of several complex investments made earlier this decade.

Cohen, who reports directly to Governor Deval Patrick, was the most insistent in asserting that a toll increase is not inevitable. "Says who a toll increase is imminent?" he said at one point in response to a board member.

"We're talking here about bank accounts, but we're also talking about people and pocketbooks," he said at another point in the meeting.

Still, he acknowledged that the board would have to come up with the money somewhere. And so far, his plans to find cost savings through efficiencies have not generated enough of it. He said legislators have not expressed support so far for a proposal to eliminate the Fast Lane discounts, which were mandated by special legislation, something that could mitigate the size of a toll increase but would require a vote by lawmakers.

"We have waited two years for the administration to come to the Legislature with a plan to restructure transportation in Massachusetts," said Representative David P. Linsky, a Natick Democrat who leads a caucus of legislators from the western suburbs. "They still haven't come forward with that plan." LeBovidge did not want to weigh in on whether there should be a toll increase. He agreed that he needs the money one way or another. His efforts to trim costs, including the number of toll takers, will not be enough to balance the agency's budget.

In a bid to get more drivers to participate in the Fast Lane program, LeBovidge announced a pilot project yesterday to give free transponders to drivers who do not have one and fill out a form. Turnpike officials have been trying to encourage drivers to use the transponders as they decrease the number of toll takers.

Regardless of whether relief comes from Beacon Hill or as a toll increase, LeBovidge cautioned against a piecemeal solution. The Turnpike Authority needs enough new revenue to maintain the roadway and Big Dig for the next five years or so, without having to continually debate new toll increases, he said. "The last thing I'd want to be associated with is another Longfellow Bridge," LeBovidge said, referring to the 102-year-old span over the Charles River that had to be partially closed this summer because of its state of disrepair.

The most recent toll increase was in January, but Cohen said at the time that he might need to come back in a year if the authority cannot find enough money elsewhere to shore up its finances. The Turnpike Authority spends more than \$100 million a year on debt and interest payments, mostly related to Big Dig construction. Board members and drivers who commute from the western suburbs have long complained that the system is not fair because so many of the drivers who pay for the Big Dig do not use it.

Board members said they would like to structure an increase to spare drivers from the western suburbs as much as possible, meaning higher rates on the Sumner and Ted Williams tunnels.

Eric Tucker, a 37-year-old software engineer from Charlton, said \$1 more at the Allston-Brighton and Weston tollbooths, the worst-case scenario, would add \$40 a week to his commute to Cambridge.

"Not cool," Tucker said. "I pay enough taxes."

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