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Tolling some Pa. interstate bridges: A non-dire impact

By Colin McNickle

Those in some quarters are predicting dire business, consumer and commuter behavior consequences should PennDOT toll nine interstate bridges across the state to pay for much-needed repairs and maintenance.

But an analysis by the Allegheny Institute for Public Policy suggests the effects will be relatively minimal and likely the best way to address Pennsylvania's deteriorating highway infrastructure challenges.

"Quite rightly, residents and businesses have a very jaundiced view of Pennsylvania's track record of funding and maintaining roads. Hence, the prospect of tolls is off-putting to many," say Frank Gamrat, executive director of the Pittsburgh think tank, and Jake Haulk, its president-emeritus (in *Policy Brief Vol. 21, No. 12*).

"However, money must be found and the bridges are getting very old and in need of replacement," they remind.

It was in 2012 that the state Legislature approved a plan whereby the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation would partner with private companies to repair, upgrade and maintain nine interstate bridges. These currently non-tolled spans would become tolled bridges to cover the costs.

In Allegheny County, that includes the Interstate 79 bridge at Bridgeville and ancillary projects to improve the Bridgeville interchange and expand the interstate to three lanes in each direction between Bridgeville to just north of Southpointe.

What the exact tolls would be has yet to be determined, though imposts of \$1 to \$2 have been floated with trucks paying the (or a) higher toll, some based on size.

Trucking firms and associations have argued the tolls will increase their costs, possibly exponentially and potentially bankrupting them. Daily commuters also have cried “Foul!” Others have wondered if toll-avoidance will lead to the clogging of smaller, non-tolled roads.

But Gamrat and Haulk, both Ph.D. economists, say such opposition points to the necessity of understanding the “elasticity of demand” for using the bridges on the interstates.

“Demand is likely to be very inelastic in that traffic will not decline much, if at all, with modest tolling added. There are two basic reasons.

“First, for trucks traveling the interstates in Pennsylvania, it is simply too time and fuel consuming to use an alternate route that involves adding an extra 100 miles or two hours to a trip.

“The cost per mile and per hour are much higher than proposed toll charges. And the use of non-freeway roads with all the traffic stops or slow-moving traffic is not a viable option,” the researchers add.

Gamrat and Haulk point to the constantly rising tolls on the Pennsylvania Turnpike but, still, rather robust traffic volume increases despite the toll hikes (excluding the past coronavirus pandemic year).

“Secondly, the trucking firm can either absorb the small added cost or pass it, or some of it, along to customers in the form of higher freight charges,” the economists say. “Thus, unless economic options to traveling the interstates are created (unlikely in the extreme) a nominal small toll is unlikely to affect truck usage of the interstates.”

For cars and pickups, the decision to use or not use a tolled bridge will depend not only on the availability of reasonable options (good roads with no major traffic headaches) but also the share of the toll as a percentage of the total cost of the travel in terms of time, distance, fuel use and wear and tear on the vehicle,” Gamrat and Haulk say.

“For more local traffic in which drivers have knowledge of alternatives and the distance to work is relatively short, there will be some traffic diminution,” they add. “For commuters traveling a long distance on the interstate, 20 or more miles, the use of the tolled bridge should not be much affected.”

All this is not to say that the Allegheny Institute’s position is unqualified. Indeed, Gamrat and Haulk say a firm handle must be found on project costs and, after that, continuing maintenance. After all, the higher the costs, the longer the payoff period.

“However, based on calculations with available estimates, each bridge project could be paid for in just a few years,” they say. But after that?

“The Legislature should look at capping the number of years the tolls can remain in place or reduce the tolls to just enough to cover maintenance and ongoing operations costs.” Gamrat and Haulk stress.

Tolling interstate projects could be a good alternative to ever higher fuel taxes if two conditions are met, they add:

First, the tolls must be as low as possible to produce only the money necessary for building and maintaining the bridges and, second, the Legislature needs to ensure through statute that the tolls will meet the first condition and cease upon bond repayment.

“Bear in mind that tolls are a use tax. Electric vehicles will pay them. Moreover, cars and trucks traveling through Pennsylvania over the bridges, but which do not purchase fuel in the state, do not contribute to paying for the bridges. But they would with tolls.

“In sum, at the low toll cost levels being proposed ... there will be very little impact on traffic on the interstates,” Gamrat and Haulk conclude.

Colin McNickle is communications and marketing director at the Allegheny Institute for Public Policy (cmcnickle@alleghenyinstitute.org).

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Allegheny Institute for Public Policy
305 Mt. Lebanon Blvd.* Suite 208* Pittsburgh PA 15234
Phone (412) 440-0079
E-mail: aipp@alleghenyinstitute.org
Website: www.alleghenyinstitute.org
Twitter: [AlleghenyInsti1](https://twitter.com/AlleghenyInsti1)