

A toll hike we have to swallow: Port Authority needs money to keep bridges & tunnels in shape

BY MITCHELL MOSS
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER
Wednesday, August 17, 2011

Everyone who lives or works in the New York-New Jersey region depends on bridges, tunnels, airports, bus terminals and airports. Despite all the rhetoric about high-speed rail, we still need regular cars, planes, vans and trucks to bring us the food we eat, stock the stores we shop in and transport the cosmetics we cannot live without.

The bridges and tunnels that span the Hudson River, linking New York City to New Jersey and to most of the nation, are operated by the Port Authority, a bistate agency under the control of the governors of New York and New Jersey. Since this agency can't impose taxes, it gets its money from tolls, fares, airplane landing fees and rent from the World Trade Center site.

Now it wants to raise tolls - a \$4 increase for E-ZPass customers on the bridges and tunnels now, then an additional \$2 next year - plus a \$1 hike in PATH fares.

People are upset. Commuters, who are going through tough economic times, say they can't afford it. Gov. Cuomo and New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie say they were unpleasantly surprised by the proposal.

I'm here to deliver an uncomfortable truth: We have to take our medicine. We have to pay enough for public transportation to work over the long haul, even when it's an entity as distrusted as the Port Authority that's pocketing the money.

The authority is a necessary evil. We cannot live without it, yet we have a hard time living with it, whether it's rebuilding the World Trade Center site or raising tolls and fares to maintain the aging infrastructure it operates.

We have come to accept extortionate gas prices that send dollars abroad, but are reluctant to spend more to maintain the bridges and tunnels that we take every day.

Why? We need to spend today if the system's going to be functioning well tomorrow. Take, for instance, the George Washington Bridge suspender ropes. Simply put, these ropes hold the bridge up, but they have not been replaced since the bridge opened in 1931. Most other major suspension bridges of a similar age - the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, the Benjamin Franklin Bridge in Philadelphia, the RFK Bridge in New York - have replaced their suspender ropes. The pain of higher tolls is nothing compared with the pain we would feel if the span of the George Washington Bridge collapses.

There are dozens of critical maintenance projects like that - basic improvements that need to be made to keep things running smoothly.

And contrary to popular belief, tolls are actually the best way to pay for highways and bridges.

In fact, long before the federal government built the Interstate Highway System, states used tolls to finance the construction of the New York State Thruway, the Maine Turnpike, the Oklahoma Turnpike linking Tulsa with Oklahoma City and, of course, the New Jersey Turnpike, which was built in less than two years.

New Jersey, best known for producing Bruce Springsteen and beefsteak tomatoes, is a vital source of skilled workers in New York City. Manhattan's high-income jobs, in turn, support the shopping malls, school districts and pristine suburbs of the Garden State. Since 2002, there has been a 21% increase in Manhattan workers coming from northern New Jersey.

And contrary to popular belief, tolls are actually the best way to pay for highways and bridges.

In fact, long before the federal government built the Interstate Highway System, states used tolls to finance the construction of the New York State Thruway, the Maine Turnpike, the Oklahoma Turnpike linking Tulsa with Oklahoma City and, of course, the New Jersey Turnpike, which was built in less than two years.

New Jersey, best known for producing Bruce Springsteen and beefsteak tomatoes, is a vital source of skilled workers in New York City. Manhattan's high-income jobs, in turn, support the shopping malls, school districts and pristine suburbs of the Garden State. Since 2002, there has been a 21% increase in Manhattan workers coming from northern New Jersey.

This region cannot survive without investing in our cross-Hudson links; these arteries are our lifeline.

In baseball we may compete with the Phillies and Red Sox, but when it comes to economic activity, we are competing with global cities in Asia, the Middle East, Europe and Latin America.

They recognize the central role of transportation in generating jobs.

If our region is to continue to compete as a global center for business, culture, health care and media, then our state governments must provide modern, safe and reliable ways to move throughout the area.

Raising the tolls by \$4 now and by \$2 in 2013 is not easy. Even the governors of the two states have expressed concern about the magnitude of the proposed increase.

But, like jumping into cold water, it's better to do it all at once, rather than to go inch by inch into the pool.

This is the right time to invest in infrastructure - when the contractors are so hungry for work that they are willing to cut their profits. And with interest rates at an all-time low, there is no better time to borrow money for long-term projects.

Moss is the director of the Rudin Center for Transportation Policy and Management and Henry Hart Rice Professor of Urban Policy and Planning at New York University's Wagner School.