

Official details plan to toll Route 422

Receipts would fund highway upgrades, add Berks stops to commuter rail line

By **Liam Migdail-Smith**
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HARRISBURG - Tolling Route 422 from the Pottstown area to King of Prussia could help generate the \$1.1 billion needed to make improvements to the highway over 15 years, a planning official said Monday.

Barry J. Seymour, executive director of the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission, told state officials that the money would pay for upgrades to the 25-mile stretch that would ease traffic flow near King of Prussia.

It also would fund highway maintenance and provide money to add Berks County stops along a proposed commuter rail line into Philadelphia.

"This is a heavily congested road that has really reached its capacity," Seymour said of the stretch. "We know if we want to get this done, we need to find a way to do it."

Seymour pitched the plan to Gov. Tom Corbett's Transportation Funding Advisory Council. The group is brainstorming ways to fund transportation projects across Pennsylvania and is expected to come up with recommendations by August.

The council won't be making any recommendations specifically on the Route 422 project, state transportation Secretary Barry J. Schooch said. However, it will consider whether to recommend legislation that would allow local governments to form groups called taxation authorities to oversee that project and others like it.

In the Route 422 project, the authority would be formed jointly by Berks, Chester and Montgomery counties. The panel would lease the stretch of Route 422 from the state, be responsible for improvement projects and have the power to add tolls.

But don't expect to see traditional toll booths, Seymour said.

The stations would use E-ZPass technology. Drivers would not have to stop at the stations. Instead, the tolls would automatically be charged to the accounts of those with an E-ZPass tag. The license plates of those without an E-ZPass would be photographed and the bills would be mailed to the drivers.

There would be four stations on the stretch, each charging drivers 50 to 80 cents. Driving the entire stretch - a trip from Berks County to King of Prussia - would cost \$2.65.

Tolls would increase 2.5 percent each year.

The Pennsylvania Department of Transportation has \$243 million set aside for the stretch of Route 422. The tolls would bridge the gap between that funding and the more than \$1 billion of proposed improvements.

Without tolls, upgrades to alleviate congestion could be dragged out over 30 years, Seymour said.

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Route 422 at the Route 100 interchange is part of a 25-mile stretch of the highway that would be tolled under a plan to raise \$1.1 billion for improvements to transportation infrastructure along the corridor.

"We will see a loss of jobs," Seymour said. "We will see people leave that corridor, perhaps leave the commonwealth, if they can't get to work."

Traffic on 422 boils down to bottle-necking at the bridge over the Schuylkill River toward Valley Forge, said Montgomery County Commissioner Joseph M. Hoeffel.

"We simply have to get them east of the Schuylkill, and we need a second bridge to do it," he said.

The improvements would build that second bridge and add more traffic lanes. The work would cut the commute on the stretch by 20 minutes each way, Seymour said.

The proposed commuter rail line would use a Norfolk Southern freight line and include stops in Wyomissing, Reading, Amity Township and several Montgomery County communities. It would connect to a line that runs from Norristown to Center City Philadelphia.

The plan is to spend two-thirds of the toll money on the highway and the other third on the train project, Seymour said.

The project requires several different local agreements, state legislature action and federal approval. Assuming everyone's on board and the approvals move along on schedule, organizers hope to have an authority up and ready to start by the end of the year, Seymour said.

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