

Report could jump-start Rte. 422 toll proposal

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A report due Monday could bring hope of relief for the 110,000 drivers who sit each day in the perpetual rush-hour parking lot known as Route 422.

Or it could come off, some politicians fear, as just another government proposal to drain constituents' wallets.

In a presentation before Gov. Corbett's transportation funding advisory commission in Harrisburg, regional planners are expected to propose turning a 25-mile stretch of the highway into a toll road.

Their plan - the result of a \$625,000, years-in-the-making study by the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission - would create a locally run authority to collect 11 cents per mile and keep that money to fund improvements such as new lanes.

While talk of tolls on 422 is nothing new, the report's release could finally force state and county officials to take a public stand on an issue that many have privately called necessary, if politically unpopular.

"If we want to fix 422, we need to find a way to pay for it ourselves," said the DVRPC's executive director, Barry Seymour. "But if the commonwealth doesn't support it, it's not going to get done."

For Seymour, who has helped guide the issue for years, it is time for planners to stop spinning their wheels in toll talk.

Anyone who has driven along the highway's most gridlocked stretch - its bridge across the Schuylkill near King of Prussia - can attest to its dashboard-banging, hair-pulling status as one of the worst commutes in the Philadelphia suburbs.

Traffic is projected to get worse as communities along its corridor such as Phoenixville, Collegeville, and Royersford continue to grow.

The DVRPC proposal would look to tolls to pay for future expansion, according to a number of officials who had reviewed it but would not discuss its findings publicly until they were presented Monday.

Route 422 stretches between King of Prussia in the east and Reading in the west, but only the most heavily traveled portions - from Douglassville to the Route 202 interchange - would be tolled.

Traveling the length of that portion could cost up to \$2.75 one way.

For vehicles with E-ZPass, fees would be recorded by overhead transponders at four locations along the route. Drivers without the electronic toll tags would receive bills at the address where their license plates are registered, their usage tracked by cameras set up at the four tolling points.

Most important, said Seymour, all revenue collected would be devoted only to 422 corridor projects instead of being funneled back into state road coffers.

Seymour's commission has already floated \$750 million worth of ideas such as expanding highway lanes, opening a second bridge over the Schuylkill, and restoring a long defunct regional rail line from Philadelphia to Reading in hopes of luring some motorists off the road.

Together, he said, those three measures could save the average driver 40 minutes of commuting time each day.

Funding the improvements through local toll collection instead of waiting for state or federal funds could mean the difference between completing the projects in 10 years instead of 30, he said.

But the proposal faces steep political hurdles.

The state and federal transportation departments must sign off on the plan. The General Assembly must pass legislation to allow local tolling authorities. (The one proposed for the 422 corridor would be the first in the state.)

And commissioners in Berks, Chester, and Montgomery Counties would need to sign on as well, agreeing to participate in the tolling board.

That might be a tall order considering the current antitax mood of the electorate. Many daily commuters oppose what they see as an imposed cost for a currently free resource.

Tolling proponents, however, are introducing their proposal this week with just that resistance in mind.

Although the governor's Transportation Funding Advisory Commission does not have to approve the 422 plan for it to move forward, the DVRPC chose its Monday meeting to make their presentation in hopes of winning the panel's support and eventually Corbett's.

Corbett has charged the committee's members with finding a way to generate more than \$2.5 billion in annual transportation funds amid tighter budgets and declining federal infrastructure spending. The panel is expected to make its recommendations by Aug. 1.

Its support could go a long way toward giving the issue the political momentum it needs among state legislators and county leaders who have remained tight-lipped on what promises to be a controversial issue among their constituents.

Many elected officials contacted Friday would not discuss their opinions on the proposed tolling, saying they preferred to withhold their opinions until seeing the DVRPC report and the recommendation's of the governor's committee.

"Everybody's looking at the report and the governor to provide some sort of cover," one county politician said.

One state legislator, however, took a clear stand against the plan. The tolling question became a prominent campaign issue for Rep. Warren Kampf (R., Chester), elected to his first term last fall on a platform that opposed tolls on 422.

His opinion on the issue has not changed, despite his up-close view of the state's transportation needs, he said Friday.

"Tolling is just another way of taxing people going to work in these hard economic times," he said. "They're already paying a lot of money in gas taxes and other fees. I just don't think this is something they want."