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Technology is making tolls (almost) painless

Sensors, cameras on Route 422 would make payment fast and easy, planners say

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Reading Eagle

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If Route 422 is tolled to pay for highway repairs and a commuter rail project, there won't be any need to count the coins in your cup holders.

Worried about waiting in line? Not going to happen. Oh, and instead of toll booths, look for toll sensors.

New camera technology is making those old coin baskets obsolete, so drivers in a hurry shouldn't worry about losing time going through toll locations, according to area planners.

It would be quick, and you would pay according to the length of your trip, planners say.

"We're not even interested in pursuing that method (cash booths)," said Alan D. Piper, Berks County chief transportation planner.

The Route 422 tolling concept was first raised last year as a means to help pay for the proposed Norristown Extension - a passenger rail service from Norristown to Wyomissing.

Planners then commissioned a study to find out how much money the tolls could take in. That study is expected to be completed this year.

After that, planners will seek approval from federal and state officials for the tolling plan. If that's approved, the train service could be up and running in three years.

To reach that point, planners say, tolling Route 422 is essential. But many in Berks don't like the idea.

A recent survey of 400 Berks County residents showed locals want the rail line - 86 percent support it - but virtually no one wants to pay tolls to fund it.

There would be one toll location in Berks County - in the Douglassville section of Amity Township, Piper said. The rest of the toll locations would be in Montgomery County. The study will suggest the number and sites.

Route 422 in Douglassville carries about 50,000 cars each day. The number of vehicles jumps to about 100,000 a day at King of Prussia, Piper said.

The revenue study also will help organizers set the toll fees.

"We might be talking about a couple dollars to get you the whole route," said Fred Levering, a Wyomissing borough councilman and transportation advocate. "It's going to have to be competitive with what it costs on the turnpike."

Skeptics might be misinformed about what the tolls would look like, rail advocates said.

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Route 422 in Douglassville would likely be a toll location in a plan being studied to pay for the proposed Norristown Extension, a passenger rail line from Norristown to Wyomissing.

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Drivers might be misinformed about what the tolls would look like, fair advocates said.

There are two options for tolling 422, said Leo Bagley, a Montgomery County planner working on the project.

A closed system means everyone would pay, and toll locations would be at every interchange.

An open system, with tolls at select interchanges, would allow drivers on short trips to get by for free.

Both options would have different pricing at select times, with the highest fees charged during rush hour.

"It would make it more attractive to travel off-peak hours," Bagley said.

Both options would use fee grids similar to those on the Pennsylvania Turnpike. Shorter trips would cost less.

Other discounts are being considered, Bagley said. Weekend drivers could receive bargains. Sundays could be free.

While toll fees and locations are being worked out, one thing seems definite: there would be no coin baskets.

"Cash at the toll booth within 20 years will be eliminated everywhere," Bagley predicted.

Throughout the toll industry, video technology is being phased in to work alongside E-ZPass. Cameras snap photos of license plates on vehicles without E-ZPass, and those drivers are mailed a bill. Processing fees can be tacked onto the toll, so drivers benefit by having E-ZPass.

Along Route 422, many travelers would likely look for alternative routes to avoid the tolls, Piper said.

"We have to address those diversions," he said.

Part of the revenue addresses choke points on parallel highways such as Route 724 and Ridge Pike (Old Route 422), he said.

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