

House OKs removing limits on toll roads

By ERIK SCHELZIG, Associated Press
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NASHVILLE - The state House voted Monday to remove limits on how many toll roads or bridges could be built in Tennessee.

House Transportation Chairman Phillip Pinion, a Union City Democrat, said the measure is necessary to jump-start infrastructure projects amid dwindling federal road money. The proposal passed on a 77-13 vote.

Tennessee transportation officials were notified last week that they will need to subtract another \$66 million from promised federal money for road work. The federal government has cut nearly a quarter-billion dollars from Tennessee's expected road money since 2005.

"This is money paid by Tennesseans at the pump" through federal gas taxes, Pinion said. Tennessee has no new road projects scheduled for this year, he said.

Rep. Frank Niceley voiced his opposition to any toll proposals, especially following a recent experience of paying tolls on a drive around New York City.

"There's bridges in England that were built by the Romans where they're still paying tolls," said Niceley, R-Strawberry Plains. "Once you start paying tolls, you don't stop paying tolls. They keep them forever."

Niceley said he'd prefer to see the state withdraw from the federal highway program and keep the gas tax money it currently sends to Washington.

Pinion was dismissive of Niceley's comments.

"With all due respect to my esteemed colleague from the East, I don't know if I have any idea what you're even talking about," he said.

While charging for highway access has been a common way to fund road building and maintenance in much of the country, most of the South has resisted the trend. Florida and Texas have made extensive use of toll roads and bridges, but there are only a handful of toll roads in the remainder of the region.

Senate Transportation Chairman Jim Tracy said the members of his panel aren't convinced that the pilot program passed last year that provides for one toll road and one toll bridge project needs to be changed.

"We worked on that hard last year, and I think a lot of committee members want to move forward like it is before we make any changes," said Tracy, R-Shelbyville.

Tracy said he doesn't expect the House version to advance out of his committee Wednesday without changes.

The House also voted 88-3 on Monday to send a proposal to Gov. Phil Bredesen that would limit the operation of toll facilities to require any companies contracting with the state to operate toll roads or bridges to be majority American owned.

The governor's spokeswoman could not immediately be reached for comment on whether he plans to sign the bill into law.

