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TDOT seeks authority to toll

Transportation study examines three new roads as candidates

By **DON JACOBS**, jacobs@knews.com
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The proposed Knoxville Regional Parkway could become the state's first toll road in 80 years if lawmakers approve legislation sought by transportation officials.

Gerald Nicely, commissioner of the Tennessee Department of Transportation, is expected this week to release a study of three projects seen as potential candidates for tolls.

But Nicely knows he's facing an uphill battle in getting motorists to pay tolls in a state that hasn't charged drivers since the 1920s to roll across asphalt.

"We would have a great deal of educating to do with the public and the Legislature before we would be able to enact a toll," Nicely said.

"Some people say they're already paying gas taxes, so this would be double taxation," he said.

Nicely in May 2006 commissioned a study by the engineering firm Wilbur Smith Associates to look at the feasibility of charging tolls on three potential routes. The study cost \$453,000, said Julie Oaks, spokeswoman for TDOT.

Ed Cole, TDOT's chief of environment and planning, said his staff selected the three routes.

"We tried to pick candidates that could be tolls based on other states' roads," Cole said.

The three projects were the parkway, also called the Orange Route; a bridge over the Cumberland River to provide access to Nashville from Hendersonville; and a road that would diverge from Interstate 40 near Strawberry Plains and lead to Gatlinburg.

Oaks said traffic studies were reviewed to determine a purpose and need for the route, costs and potential financing options, and expected population growths based on local government projections.

Cole said that, of the three, a new route to Gatlinburg was the least appealing because of a lack of information about traffic flow and demand.

"It doesn't mean there's not a possibility there," he said. "It means we need to look at it more."

Tolls and truckers The \$100 million Nashville project and the proposed parkway, which would be designated State Route 475 if built, will get a thumbs-up from the study, Cole said.

"The parkway is probably further along than any of them," he said of the three routes.

Cole said the study reviewed both legs of a proposed loop north of Knoxville. The projected \$570 million loop that would connect Interstate 75 in Loudon County to I-75 in Anderson County is the first leg. The next leg would connect I-75 to I-40 east of Knoxville.

"Obviously, the numbers are better with the full loop," Cole said.

TDOT proposed the Orange Route because of a need to divert commercial trucks from downtown Knoxville, where the co-mingled I-75 and I-40 carry up to 165,000 vehicles a day.

Cole said that while independent truckers oppose toll roads, major trucking firms were warmer to

the concept.

"Time is money, and they'll go with the best route," he said of large companies. "If they can save 25 minutes by paying a \$2.50 toll, they'd do it."

Independent trucker George Earls, who lives in Seymour, said that "75 percent of them would just go downtown" to avoid a parkway toll.

Mark Richey, president of Citizens Against the Beltway Orange Location, said he can't envision the motoring public embracing a toll on the parkway. The group formed in 1997 to fight the Orange Route has retained a lawyer to continue the battle.

"People are not going to pay the toll until traffic backs up downtown and makes it worthwhile to pay the toll; that's human nature," Richey said.

"If we need the road, the general public should be willing to pay for it," he said. "If the road is really important, why not just issue bonds?"

Paying for projects Cole emphasized that proposed toll legislation would apply only to future roads and possibly the carpooling lanes found in Nashville and Memphis. Having toll funds would free up fuel tax money to pay for other projects, he said.

Nicely said TDOT for now is proposing only the authority to impose tolls, as is done in 26 other states. He is not asking for laws that would allow private/public partnerships in building roads, which several other states have embraced.

Nicely said he will appear this week before the Legislature to explain what road projects the state will not be able to afford without a change in the funding formula. TDOT's 10-year road plan is facing a \$2 billion shortfall.

"We are asking that it be an available option," Nicely said of tolls. "It's something we would do only with strong local support. But I do think it's something we need as a tool."

Nicely said toll roads alone won't solve TDOT's funding shortfalls. He also wants to look at indexing the state's fuel taxes to the cost of living.

Tennessee now levies a 21.4-cents-per-gallon tax on gasoline, nearly 6 cents below the national average of 27.1 cents per gallon. The last time the state increased its fuel tax was in 1989.

Since the last increase, the gas tax has lost more than one-third of its buying power because of inflation.

Tennessee charges 18.4 cents per gallon for diesel, contrasted to a national average of 28.1 cents per gallon. The state is one of 13 that have a lower tax on diesel than on gasoline. Tennessee's diesel tax is the 41st lowest in the country, according to the American Petroleum Institute.

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