



This is a printer friendly version of an article from the **The Tennessean**. To print this article open the file menu and choose Print.

< < Back

TDOT commissioner says state should consider toll roads

Published: Friday, 10/14/05

CHATTANOOGA, Tenn. (AP) -- Tennessee Highway Commissioner Gerald Nicely wants the state to consider building toll roads but he first has to persuade Gov. Phil Bredesen that motorists should pay tolls on top of state and federal gasoline taxes that total 39.8 cents per gallon.

Nicely said the toll roads would be operated by private corporations for profit.

"Within the next two to three years, we're going to have to make some hard decisions on how we're going to have to finance our system for the next two decades," Nicely told the Chattanooga Times Free Press.

"I think we need to start talking about them right now," he said. "I don't think (we need to be) necessarily jumping into them in the next year."

Some other states, including Texas, Florida and Virginia, already are using or considering such options to pay for new roads at a time when budgets are tight. Transportation officials are worried that gas taxes used for highway construction won't be enough.

Bredesen "is not warm to the idea of toll roads for Tennessee," said his spokeswoman, Lydia Lenker.

She said the governor would consider toll roads if they are included in the state's Long Range Transportation Plan. That plan helps steer the state's transportation growth, she said. It is to be completed in the next few months.

Tennessee's gas tax generated \$608.1 million last year, up from \$601 million the previous year, records show. During the past 10 years, gas tax revenues increased or remained stable every year except 2001, according to the Department of Transportation.

Motorists pay Tennessee 21.4 cents on each gallon of gas and the federal government collects 18.4 cents.

Department spokeswoman Kim Keelor said officials don't know how much extra money the state eventually will need for its roads.

"(Gas tax revenues) are increasing a little bit but not keeping up at the rate at which projects are needed and demanded," she said.

Nicely said financing options such as toll roads will be "a major piece" of transportation plan discussions.

Tennessee lawmakers would have to approve building toll roads or any "public-private partnerships" contracts with corporations to buy rights of way (and) construct and maintain new roads for at least several years.

Such corporations typically use toll revenues to pay off construction costs.

Nicely said the proposed "Orange Route" beltway around Knoxville would be a good candidate for a public-private partnership.

The idea is to create a true "user fee" that makes drivers pay for the wear and tear they put on roads, said state Rep. Phillip Pinion, D-Union City, chairman of the House Transportation Committee.

Pinion said its unlikely that Tennessee voters would approve another gas tax increase.

He said he expects insufficient gas tax revenues to become a problem in Tennessee within three to five years, especially as more people buy hybrids and use biodiesel fuel.

Published: Friday, 10/14/05
