



The Star-Ledger

N.J. looks for cash to widen Turnpike

\$2B project targets congested 30 miles

Tuesday, October 23, 2007

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The New Jersey Turnpike Authority has a plan to fix the worst bottleneck on New Jersey's busiest toll road. It just has to figure out how to pay for it.

The authority has been moving ahead with a \$2 billion plan to widen more than 30 miles of the Turnpike in central New Jersey. It held four public hearings last month, and the last of the eight firms it will bring on to do the final engineering is expected to be hired by the end of this month.

The project would be the largest and most costly widening in the 50-year history of the road, and paying for it could require a toll hike of more than 25 percent, officials have said.

The work done so far -- preliminary engineering and some property acquisition -- has been paid for with money that had been set aside for another project, a proposed link between the Turnpike and Route 1 that was to be known as Route 92. The Turnpike Authority abandoned that project last year and reallocated the \$175 million to the widening project.

That leaves the authority \$1.825 billion short.

"As we are looking at this project right now, we know there's no revenue to pay for it," said Transportation Commissioner Kris Kolluri, who is also chairman of the Turnpike Authority board. "We're still looking for a financing option."

Kolluri raised the possibility of the 25 percent toll hike in a report to Gov. Jon Corzine earlier this month on the condition of the state's bridges.

The last significant Turnpike widening, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, resulted in a toll hike of 70 percent for cars and 100 percent for trucks.

Steve Carrellas, the New Jersey coordinator of the National Motorists Association, a group that advocates for drivers, said his group could support a toll increase to pay for the widening.

"I'm not saying we'll support it. We can't do anything until it's a real proposal," Carrellas said. "At least it makes for a reasonable discussion when the money will be going into a project that will improve a road that is used by the people who will be paying for it."

The planned improvements include widening the road from three lanes in each direction to six between Interchanges 6 in Burlington County and 8A in Middlesex County. From Interchange 8A to Interchange 9, the authority plans to widen the road from five lanes in each direction to six.

New ramps would be built at the interchanges, existing ramps would be widened and new lanes would be added at some of the toll plazas.

"This is the single most important project on our Turnpike list," Kolluri said.

One way traffic engineers measure congestion is by assigning a roadway a "level of service" grade between A and F, with A being assigned to highways where traffic flows without interruption and F being assigned to highways where it barely flows at all.

Several stretches of Turnpike between interchanges 6 and 9 get grades of D or lower, officials said.

The bottleneck occurs because traffic has to squeeze from six lanes in each direction north of Interchange 9 to five lanes south of Interchange 9 and to just three lanes south of Interchange 8A.

The volume of traffic squeezing into that funnel has grown by 46 percent since 1990 as the population and the number of jobs in Central Jersey have grown, Turnpike officials said.

The population and employment is expected to continue to grow over the next 25 years, and so too are the Turnpike traffic volumes, said Steve Buente, a supervising engineer in the Turnpike's planning and environmental department. Buente discussed the need for the project during a public hearing at a hotel in East Windsor.

Despite the gridlock today and projections it will only get worse, the widening plan faces some opposition.

The New Jersey Chapter of the Sierra Club, usually a vocal opponent of projects that expand highway capacity, came out in favor of the widening when it was first announced in December 2002. But after reviewing the environmental impact statement for the project, the group now opposes the plan, Director Jeff Tittel said.

In a resolution approved this week, the Sierra Club says the widening project, "does not reduce traffic congestion, induces inappropriate development and sprawl, removes hundreds of acres of open space, does not enhance goods movement, does not promote appropriate land use practices, and does not encourage alternate transportation, trip reduction, nor more efficient freight movement."

Tittel said the Turnpike Authority should have looked more carefully at alternatives, including building a smaller number of "flex" lanes. Those are lanes that could be used for northbound traffic at times of day when northbound traffic is heaviest and for southbound traffic at times when southbound traffic is heaviest.

Another advocacy group, the Tri-State Transportation Campaign, has also faulted the authority for not adequately considering alternatives such as expanded mass transit and high-occupancy toll lanes. Zoe Baldwin, Tri-State's New Jersey coordinator, during an appearance at the public hearing in East Windsor, urged the authority to postpone the project.

"If there is indeed data justifying this project, it is not in the environmental impact statement," Baldwin said.

There is also local opposition to the project in Burlington, Mercer and Middlesex counties over issues such as sound barriers and property acquisition.

The Turnpike Authority, which hopes to begin construction in mid-2009, will need to acquire 381 acres of land to make way for the road, according to the environmental impact statement. That will include only between 10 and 20 complete properties, Keller said. The rest of the acreage will be acquired as pieces of property, usually relatively thin strips along the right of way.

LeRoy Bruce Jones, an East Windsor resident, could lose part of his front yard and all of an adjacent wooded lot. He appeared at the public hearing to ask the authority to minimize the impact on his 167-year-old home.

"I love my home," he said. "It's all I have."

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