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Rhode Island's New Route for Funding Bridge Repairs: Truck Tolls.

Rhode Island has the highest percentage of structurally deficient bridges in the country — 23 percent. Now, it's taking a novel approach to paying for their repair: Truck-only tolls on major bridges throughout the state.

Rhode Island lawmakers adopted the plan earlier this month, and Gov. Gina Raimondo promptly signed off on it. The agency estimates that tractor trailers cause 70 percent of the damage to the state's roads every year, but currently account for just 20 percent of the revenue to pay for that infrastructure.

Overcoming opposition from truckers, the new law authorizes tolls of up to \$20 on large commercial trucks for a statewide trip on Interstate 95. The Rhode Island Department of Transportation (RIDOT) anticipates that once it starts collecting tolls over the next two years, they'll raise \$45 million a year — a 10 percent increase to the agency's budget.

That money, combined with \$420 million worth of bonding, would pay for repairs or replacement of 650 bridges in the next decade. That would bring the percentage of structurally deficient bridges to under 10 percent, as required by federal law, according to RIDOT spokesman Charles St. Martin.

"Trucks are the vehicles that impose the greatest amount of damage on the highways," said Patrick Jones, the head of the International Bridge, Tunnel and Turnpike Association, an industry group. "In fact, when you're building the highways, you're building them to handle heavy trucks."

Rhode Island's approach is unique in the United States, Jones said. It is "probably the only state that is imposing tolls only on trucks, not on all vehicles," he said. "However, if you look at the entire world, it's not uncommon." Germany and Switzerland, for example, have nationwide truck tolls.

Raimondo, who originally pushed a plan with even higher tolls on trucks last year, argued that Rhode Island was virtually alone among Northeastern states in not tolling the interstate. Connecticut, which removed its tolls following a deadly 1983 crash at a toll plaza, is the only other state between Maryland and Maine that doesn't use tolls. Although, lawmakers there are reconsidering that stance.

Trucking groups fought the proposal vigorously. "Our strategy has been since day one, no tolls," Rhode Island Trucking Association president Chris Maxwell told Providence's WPRI. "We're not down at the statehouse to cut any deals or make nice with anybody. From day one, [we've been] against tolls."

The state trucking group suggested last year that raising Rhode Island's diesel tax and truck registration fees would be better ways of raising money.

Stephanie Kane, a spokeswoman for the Alliance for Toll-Free Interstates, said the new tolls have already prompted some companies to consider leaving Rhode Island. "While the governor heralds

RhodeWorks as a jobs booster, the reality is that it harms Rhode Island businesses and will cost Rhode Island jobs,” she said.

The American Trucking Associations also warned Raimondo that her administration’s plan to prevent trucks from leaving highways to avoid tolls could run afoul of federal regulations. Those rules require states to let trucks have easy access to food, fuel, repairs and rest, an association lawyer wrote.

Federal law also normally prevents states from tolling existing interstates without adding new capacity. Rhode Island’s tolling program takes advantage of one of the exceptions to that law: States can put tolls on a non-tolled bridge if they replace or repair that bridge. Each of Rhode Island’s 14 proposed tolling sites is on a bridge or overpass.

The tolls would all be collected electronically using E-ZPass transponders. RIDOT anticipates that it will contract with a company to design, build, operate and maintain the tolling operations. The agency expects the cost of running the program will only take up 5 percent of the revenues. “This application of new technology has made it feasible for the DOT to implement tolls on many bridges that were uneconomical in the past,” St. Martin said.

Rhode Island’s new tolls are part of a larger effort, called RhodeWorks, to shore up the state’s crumbling bridges. It would include massive new projects, like the completion of a \$170 million replacement of the viaduct carrying I-95 through Providence, as well as preventive maintenance for hundreds of bridges.

One of the biggest elements of the plan is rebuilding an interchange of two major highways on Providence’s west side, which means replacing 11 bridges. The project has been on the books for 30 years and could cost as much as \$500 million — more than the whole RhodeWorks program. The state hopes to win federal grants to cover much of the cost.

New federal funding from Fixing America’s Surface Transportation (FAST) Act, which Congress passed late last year, will also help Rhode Island’s bridge-building effort. Increased federal funding helped the state cut in half the amount of bonding it planned to use for RhodeWorks. That, in turn, reduced the amount of interest the state will pay by 65 percent.

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