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GOP wants tolls for I-70 lanes

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Republican leaders offered their transportation plans Tuesday, releasing details about two new bills that soon will be introduced in the Colorado Legislature.

One bill will call for requiring tolls to access the Eisenhower and Johnson tunnels on Interstate 70 west of Denver. The second will reserve auto-related sales tax revenue, nearly \$293 million in 2007, to transportation projects only.

The meeting to announce the proposals was led by House Republican Leader Mike May, R-Parker, and Senate Republican Leader Andy McElhany, R-Colorado Springs.

Both McElhany and May acknowledged that neither of the proposals thoroughly address Colorado's transportation needs, but they said the proposed ballot initiative could represent "a first step" in that direction.

One of the proposals, which the two called "a cornerstone" of the Republican transportation agenda, would allow voters to protect transportation funding by requiring auto-related sales tax revenue to be used only for transportation projects.

"Right now transportation funding is first run through the rest of the budget and can be easily siphoned off to other spending areas before it reaches its final destination," May said in a statement. "This proposal stops the earmarking of these dollars and ensures that this pot of money cannot be used like a barrel full of pork for various projects and programs."

May said that until that problem is addressed, any additional transportation dollars could easily end up just replacing other dollars that are escaping out the back door.

"That type of zero-sum game does nothing to meet growing transportation needs," he said in the statement.

According to May, last year Coloradans paid nearly \$293 million in auto-related sales tax. If approved by the voters, the May-McElhany proposal would dedicate that sum solely to transportation funding.

The second proposal would widen snarled portions of Interstate 70 using revenue generated from a \$5 toll to be paid by drivers at the base of the Eisenhower and Johnson tunnels on I-70.

May and McElhany said that while they anticipate some resistance from truckers, the proposal is "business friendly."

"Three-hour traffic jams are bad for business," May said, adding that the toll concept applies to people who use the highway instead of taxing the Colorado population at large.

The announcement said the proposal would generate nearly \$40 million in the first year. That money would be used to secure a \$1 billion bond for the first phase of a widening project between Floyd Hill and U.S. 40 -- the turnoff for the Winter Park ski resort.

Under the proposal, local traffic would be exempt from the toll.

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