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Report Suggests New Tolls For Region

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Plan Could Produce \$2.75 Billion Yearly For Roads, Transit

By Eric M. Weiss
Washington Post Staff Writer
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Regional transportation and political leaders are increasingly coming to the conclusion that the only way to keep the chronically congested Washington region moving is tolls, and plenty of them.

A report to be released Wednesday pushes a regionwide system that would place tolls on most existing area highways, bridges into the District, the [Baltimore-Washington Parkway](#), George Washington Memorial Parkway and such major District thoroughfares as New York Avenue. The key to success, the authors say, is the comprehensiveness of the network.

Officials, pointing to the lack of any sizable investment in the region's transportation infrastructure by [Virginia](#), [Maryland](#) or the federal government, say they see no other realistic options to keep traffic moving, accommodate newcomers and get desperately needed money to pay for new roads and improved transit. The tolls could generate more than \$2.75 billion a year, according to the report.

"We've got to be straight with people," said [Michael Knapp](#) (D-Upcounty), a Montgomery County Council member who worked on the federally funded study undertaken by the [Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments](#) Transportation Policy Board. "These recommendations put them out there. It's pretty clear that there's no money coming from anywhere outside the region."

The Washington region has the second-worst traffic in the nation, and projections call for the region to grow by 1.3 million people and 1 million jobs by 2030, according to the planning board.

No one is suggesting building tollbooths in the middle of New York Avenue. The study envisions tolls being deducted through [E-ZPass](#)-like transponders as vehicles travel at normal speed. Tolls would range from less than 20 cents a mile to an average bridge toll of \$2.80.

"Here we are in a rapidly growing region and barely able to maintain our systems, address congestion or add transit," said [Ronald F. Kirby](#), transportation director for the council of governments. "The needs are so great after years of not keeping up. Given the dearth of resources from other sources, it's time to really start to look at things."

The study, which will be presented to the council of governments' Transportation Planning Board, includes three scenarios. The first would add a series of new toll lanes to every freeway in the region, with tolls applying only to drivers on those lanes, a proposal that is seen as unworkable. The new roads and overpasses would be so costly and eat up so much land that it is essentially a non-starter.

"We can't build a duplicate highway network; it ain't gonna happen," Kirby said.

The report lays out two other scenarios that would add tolls to existing highways:

One would add tolls to all District river crossings and existing freeway lanes in the city, where there is no room for new or expanded lanes. The plan would, in effect, connect the 1960s-era highway network that was discontinued in favor of Metrorail. For example, the stretch of New York Avenue from the District line to the Third Street tunnel, which connects U.S. 50 and Interstate 395, would be tolled. Similarly, the stretch of Independence and [Maine](#) avenues that joins the Arlington Memorial Bridge and Southeast/Southwest Freeway would be tolled.

The most comprehensive scenario, which has captured the imagination of planners and government leaders, would toll every regional highway, plus all the regional parkways, including the [Baltimore-Washington](#), [George Washington](#),

Rock Creek and Potomac, [Clara Barton](#) and Suitland parkways.

According to the report, the most comprehensive tolling network would raise \$2.75 billion a year, increase transit use by 6 percent, boost carpool rates by 4 percent and result in a relatively small -- 1.2 percent -- increase in vehicle miles traveled, which is how traffic planners measure the amount of driving.

[Arlington County Board](#) member [Chris Zimmerman](#) (D), who leads the [Northern Virginia Transportation Authority](#) and is chairman of the Metro board, agreed that a tolling system would work best if it was comprehensive.

Underscoring the difficulty of securing funds for Washington area transportation projects, Zimmerman is currently wrangling with state lawmakers over \$300 million in local taxing authority that was ruled unconstitutional by the [Virginia Supreme Court](#).

Toll proponents say users should pay for the true cost of highways. Unlike traveling by Metro or airplane, users can take roads for free, and there is no financial incentive to reduce unnecessary trips, adjust timing, carpool or use transit. Roads in the region are so overused that they no longer operate dependably.

Under a toll system, "You would get a bill every month, depending on how much you use the highway system, just like any other utility," said Zimmerman, a member of the committee that issued the report. "It would operate like a regular market with market efficiencies," he said.

"My worry is that we would do something piecemeal, which I think the study shows would not be effective," Zimmerman said.

On that point, Zimmerman is not optimistic. Unlike [London](#), [Stockholm](#) or [Manhattan](#), which have or are considering congestion tolling, the Washington area is covered by three jurisdictions -- two states and the District -- plus the federal government.

The [National Park Service](#) is already on record as opposing the tolling of parkways, saying such action might be illegal and is impractical; the parkways already have problems handling large sport-utility vehicles, let alone a heavy increase in transit buses.

And it doesn't take much imagination to envision local elected officials trying to exempt their local roadways from the tolling network.

"It's worth talking about all of it," said [D.C. Council](#) member [Phil Mendelson](#) (D-At Large), who is also chairman of the National Capital Region Transportation Planning Board. "But I think it will be a decade before we get there."

Said Virginia [Secretary of Transportation Pierce R. Homer](#): "We can't leave any funding options off the table, but we have to be realistic. These are not easy problems to solve."

[Jack Cahalan](#), spokesman for the Maryland Department of Transportation, described the report as a "visionary exercise" that doesn't take into account cost, regional politics or citizen solutions.

"There is not one blanket solution," Cahalan said. "We have to use every tool in the toolbox. We've got to look at transit, variable pricing, transit-oriented development. . . . Just looking at variable pricing as a solution is not the end-all. It's a tool in the toolbox where it makes sense to do so."

Kirby said the 18-month study, funded by the [Federal Highway Administration](#), was more than an exercise.

"We think it should be seriously considered; otherwise, we wouldn't put it out there," Kirby said.

"Does it all have to be done immediately? No. We've already added some tolling facilities and we're on our way. So let's look for some more," Kirby said, referring to tolls planned for Virginia and Maryland. "But the absolute key is to plow every penny of tolls back into transit."

Washington area drivers will soon experience for themselves the pluses and minuses of congestion-priced highways. The first of a network of high-occupancy-toll, or HOT, lanes in Virginia could open in just two years, and the intercounty connector in Maryland, which also will impose tolls, is scheduled to be completed by 2012. A widening of a 10-mile stretch of Interstate 95 south of [Baltimore](#) will have express toll lanes. The projects will use tolls to regulate traffic by raising or lowering tolls every few minutes to encourage the optimum number of vehicles on a highway while keeping traffic moving at highway speeds.

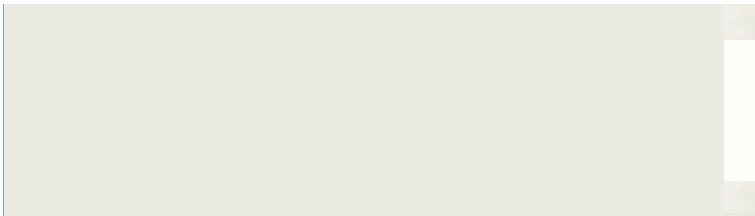
Transportation leaders point to the grudging acceptance of HOT lanes and think there is a new openness among Washington-area leaders to tolling the region's way out of its traffic mess.

"I've been surprised by the lack of horror at this idea," Kirby said of tolls. "Ten years ago, people would have said you were out of your mind. Now, people are saying, 'Push a little farther.' No question it's a tough sell politically. But it's becoming much more realistic."

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