

Toll-road ideas advance in Senate

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The Arizona Republic

Mar. 19, 2008 12:00 AM

Proposals that would pave the way for new toll roads in Arizona rolled forward in the Legislature on Tuesday.

Two bills that would allow public agencies to work with private companies to finance, build and maintain pay-as-you-go roads won tentative approval from the full Senate. Lawmakers didn't get around to voting on a related bill.

The Republican-sponsored bills encountered vocal opposition from other GOP lawmakers, who raised questions about how the toll projects would function in the long run.

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How would taxpayers know if they were paying a fair toll? Would tolls be eliminated after the road project is paid off? And would the creation of these projects lead to efforts to switch existing roads into toll roads?

"Once we start building toll roads, there will be a great appetite" for converting existing roads to generate more transportation dollars, said Sen. Barbara Leff, R-Paradise Valley, who added that toll roads have proliferated in her native New York.

Both Sens. Jay Tibshraeny, Chandler Republican, and Ron Gould, the bills' primary sponsors, emphasized that their bills only focused on new roadways, not existing ones. And details on toll prices, they said, would be worked out in contracts between public agencies and private entities. The proposals come as the state struggles to fund new transportation projects to alleviate traffic congestion on its freeways. Arizona's gas tax, fixed at 18 cents per gallon, has failed to haul in enough revenue to keep up with rising transportation costs.

Gould, R-Lake Havasu City, said possible toll-road projects could include a connector between Interstate 10 and Prescott designed to relieve congestion on Interstate 17, or a bypass around downtown Phoenix to get vehicles off clogged Interstate 10.

"I'm not a traffic engineer and I don't think I should be the one to make these decisions, but I do think (the Arizona Department of Transportation) needs to have this as one of their tools in the toolbox," said Gould, chairman of the Senate Transportation Committee.

Tibshraeny and Gould said they were hopeful their bills would receive final Senate approval and be sent to the House.

Specifically, Tibshraeny's proposal, Senate Bill 1420, would allow cities, counties and the state to form special authorities to work with private entities to finance, construct and operate toll roads and other projects in Arizona's three largest counties.

SB 1465, introduced by Gould, would require ADOT to develop public-private partnerships to carry out state transportation projects.

SB 1498, the bill by Sen. Pamela Gorman that was not considered on Tuesday, would allow ADOT to enter into partnerships for the financing, construction and operation of toll roads and other projects.

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