

July 9, 2008

Latest Plan for Corzine to Consider: Private Lanes on the Turnpike

By [NATE SCHWEBER](#)

First, Gov. [Jon S. Corzine](#) all but offered to lease the New Jersey Turnpike to the highest bidder. Then he floated the bizarre bureaucratic notion of creating a public benefit corporation so the taxpaying public could, essentially, become a private entity and operate the turnpike and other highways (which are now run by a different quasi-public agency).

He proposed an 800 percent toll increase to pay for the state's aging roads and draw down half of its more than \$30 billion in debt.

Now, after all those ideas have been shot down, Mr. Corzine is considering a new prospect for financing critical infrastructure and reducing congestion on the road: Privatize individual lanes.

"It does make you wonder what's next," said [Jon Shure](#), president of New Jersey Policy Perspective, a nonprofit research organization.

On Monday, the State Senate president, [Richard J. Codey](#), a Democrat of Essex County, unveiled his proposal for a private company to build an extension on the turnpike from Exit 8A to Exit 6 and on the Garden State Parkway from Exit 82 down to an exit in the 30s for drivers willing to pay extra to avoid traffic.

At the same time, State Senator Raymond J. Lesniak, a Democrat from Union County who is chairman of the Economic Growth Committee, offered his own twist, suggesting that the new lanes be reserved for buses and trucks.

Both senators said that the state could not afford a pending \$2.7 billion expansion of the turnpike and that bringing in a private company would be the fastest way to raise the money without increasing tolls or taxes.

"The money has to come from somewhere, and to me this seems the best way to do it," Senator Lesniak said. "It's like magic."

Governor Corzine said both ideas were "worthy of examination" on Tuesday. The governor was in Perth Amboy, signing the so-called family care bill mandating insurance coverage for children.

"We're looking at a whole host of alternatives, and we have an absolute need to come together with a plan," he said, when asked about the lane proposals.

Since Mr. Corzine first flirted with leasing the highways, which he publicly discussed this year, the various proposals have prompted public outcry, and the latest iteration is no different. Many drivers, their

advocates, and elected officials have reservations about creating private lanes even if they could help pay for road repairs and repay the state's burdensome debt.

"This certainly is creative, but in the long run it probably isn't a good idea," Stephen G. Carrellas, coordinator of the New Jersey chapter of the National Motorists Association, said in an interview on Tuesday.

While similar plans have been tried in California, Indiana and Illinois, analysts say they are fraught with problems that could also happen in New Jersey. For example, if individual lanes are privately owned, it would be in the owners' interest to keep the public lanes slower than theirs, so they might try to put speed limits or other regulations in the contract.

"The more congested the general purpose lanes, the better the value of the franchise of the express lanes," said Jonathan R. Peters, associate professor of finance at the College of Staten Island.

But others said that such a system would simply be of benefit to the wealthy.

"The turnpike is for everybody, and I'm not sure I want to have lanes that are just for rich people and other lanes that are just for ordinary folks," said Peter Humphreys, a spokesman for Save Our Assets N.J., a community organization started last year to monitor the various road proposals.

And some are just philosophically opposed to the state's selling off of assets. Matthew Wright, president of the New Jersey Motor Truck Association, likened the turnpike proposal to auctioning police stations or fire departments.

"You shouldn't lose control of your roads either," he said.

According to the [New Jersey Turnpike Authority](#), which operates the highways, trucks make up 13 percent of all traffic on the turnpike, but pay 33 percent of all tolls because vehicles are charged per axle. A new report from the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy shows that 9.5 percent of the state's private employment and 11 percent of its gross domestic product comes from trucking and warehousing.

"My concern is, if you turn over an entity like this to a private party, you might have unintended consequences of tolls going higher than we might want, and it might affect our most robust industry," said Martin E. Robins, a senior fellow at the Alan M. Voorhees Transportation Center at [Rutgers University](#).

Senator Codey said toll rates would be established by the state as part of the bidding process.

"We would dictate the price of tolls out of the box and dictate what they will be in the future before they get the job," he said.

Assemblyman John S. Wisniewski, a Democrat from Middlesex County who is chairman of the Transportation and Public Works Committee, said that he was open to the idea of a premium toll lane. However, he said the Turnpike Authority should construct it so the money would go to the state rather than to a private entity.

“The Turnpike Authority should be doing it themselves, because they don’t have to build in a profit margin,” he said.

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