

Gas tax increase, tolls are needed for state's highways

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Gov. Dannel Malloy's public statement about the financial problems of the Connecticut state highway system is disturbing and calls for prompt corrective action.

As a starting point, let's first focus on key historical facts.

During the late 1950s and early 1960s, our country, under the leadership of President Dwight Eisenhower, made a national commitment to construct and/or to reconstruct several superhighways throughout our country in what came to be known as the Eisenhower Interstate Highway system.

Here in Connecticut that Eisenhower program resulted in the construction of Interstates 84, 91, 95, 291, 384, 395, and 691.

For the first several years of that Eisenhower program, the federal government took the lead by providing substantial grants for highway construction and/or reconstruction to individual states, with those federal grants requiring each recipient state to contribute a certain smaller amount of matching grant money.

Prior to the early 1980s, Connecticut's matching highway-construction-grant money was obtained primarily from two sources: 1) tolls charged to highway users, and 2) a 39-cent per gallon retail gasoline sales tax included in the price of every gallon of gasoline sold in Connecticut.

As a result of a horrible accident in January 1983 on the I-95 Stratford toll plaza, Connecticut terminated all highway toll charges. Connecticut has not charged any toll to any its highway users since then. In fact, Connecticut is the only state on the Atlantic coastline that does not impose any toll charge on any of its highway users.

During the 1990s, Connecticut also reduced its retail gasoline sales tax from 39 cents per gallon to 25 cents per gallon, more than a 33 percent reduction. It has remained at 25 cents since then.

To add to this deepening highway-construction-revenue problem, federal grant money for highway construction in recent years has become much smaller and is not expected to be increased.

To add urgency to this drastic funding-shortfall, there are two elevated sections of I-84 — one in Hartford and one in Waterbury — that are showing signs of crumbling and which may need to be shut down for public safety unless millions of dollars can be found for needed reconstruction of those sections.

To fulfill Connecticut's responsibility for maintaining its highway system in safe condition and to avoid any shutdown of either of those two elevated sections of I-84, an increase of at least a few cents per gallon in the gasoline sales tax is urgently needed as soon as possible.

Another key source of financial funding for highway construction and/or reconstruction that needs to be reactivated is the imposition of toll charges on highway users.

Because of significant electronic-tolling-technology changes now available and used in other states, tollbooths like the Stratford toll plaza are no longer needed.

As illustrated by recent changes in the Massachusetts Turnpike tolling system, new electronic-tolling apparatus in overhead traffic monitors is capable of imposing toll charges on all moving traffic without requiring traffic to slow down.

Before being able to activate any tolling system on interstate highways, Connecticut will first need to negotiate with the federal government to obtain permission, then need to purchase and to install the needed electronic-tolling equipment before being able to collect any revenue. Fulfilling these requirements would likely delay the start of any tolling revenue for at least a few years.

The first goal after obtaining state legislative authorization should be to increase the state's retail gasoline sales tax. The second goal should be to start negotiations with the federal government regarding tolling, and thereafter purchase and install the needed electronic-tolling equipment.

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