

Our Approach to Tolling

North Carolina's transportation system faces some unique financial challenges. Today's vehicles are more fuel efficient, meaning the N.C. Department of Transportation now collects less money from its largest funding source – the state gas tax. Coupled with that, federal funding is unstable, and our state revenue stream is shrinking. We simply don't have enough money to meet all the transportation needs of our fast-growing state.

North Carolina must develop new systems to close this infrastructure gap and better serve taxpayers. Gov. McCrory took a big step in this direction when he, along with legislative leaders and NCDOT Secretary Tata, unveiled a new plan for more effectively spending North Carolina's transportation dollars. Unfortunately, this plan alone is not enough.

While toll roads are not the right solution for every transportation need in North Carolina, they are an important tool in our toolbox. NCDOT's intent is to use tolling on a limited basis. The department will look at areas with major congestion and consider adding capacity to alleviate the gridlock, if the urban and rural planning groups agree tolling is a viable option, and traffic and revenue analysis show it is financially feasible. The department believes a sound approach includes the option to use existing general-purpose lanes to offer the reduced travel time associated with toll lanes. NCDOT is committed to working with the Governor, General Assembly, local elected officials and the people of North Carolina to find the best solution for our transportation needs.

Over the next 30 years, the population in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg area is expected to increase by 1.3 million people. It will take 20 years to add enough general-purpose lanes to ease the congestion currently on I-77. The state cannot keep up with the area's projected growth without exploring other innovative funding options. The managed lanes project – one of the first public-private partnerships on the state's highway system – will allow NCDOT to meet the demand placed on the I-77 corridor.

Regarding funding, it will be difficult to determine under the new Strategic Mobility Formula where the managed lanes project would rank since it was scored under a different set of criteria. Using data from previous scoring methods and combining them with new processes would lead to incorrect results. Under existing funding mechanisms, there is no support for general-purpose lanes on I-77 in Mecklenburg County prior to 2030.

Those who oppose tolling will argue that the state should just pay for additional general-purpose lanes that will add more capacity. Unfortunately, this is not a realistic option until decades down the road when the problems that exist now will only be worse. Even considering general purpose lanes as an alternative and scoring them against the High Occupancy Toll lanes project would cause another two year delay, at the end of which the problem would be exacerbated and the solution would not have changed.

I-77 can be a landmark project for the state of North Carolina. It can prove that in areas where congestion is significant and existing funds are not available to provide relief, tolling can be the one and

only option that is reasonable and appropriate for immediate action. In a climate where resources are limited, we must not restrict the innovative options that North Carolina can use to better serve its citizens.