

Kanjorski expands on reason why all highways should be tolled, not just Interstate 80

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He's against it, but may be for it but only if U.S. Rep. Paul E. Kanjorski opposes turning Interstate 80 into a toll road, but thinks if tolls are imposed on I-80, then every interstate in Pennsylvania should have one so I-80's toll is cheaper.

Kanjorski, D-11, first made the statement during a meeting Tuesday that he hosted in Bloomsburg with Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission officials. Turnpike officials will have the job of overseeing the 311-mile interstate that spans Pennsylvania if the federal government approves tolling it.

He expanded on his belief Wednesday. "If we support that (tolling) on all of the highways, it would be fairer," Kanjorski said.

Kanjorski said he'll work to defeat tolling I-80 because it will cost communities along the interstate jobs as companies close, but his opposition letter to the Federal Highway Administration will include his support of a toll-them-all alternative.

It would probably take an act of Congress to allow tolling of all interstates, and then, probably, action by the state General Assembly.

Chuck Ardo, Gov. Ed Rendell's press secretary, said the governor laughed heartily when told of the proposal.

"Clearly, the representative has a sense of humor as well," Ardo said.

Federal law does not allow tolling most interstates. Under federal law, the Federal Highway Administration is only authorized to accept applications for three interstate tolling projects nationwide, and the deadline for applications is 2015. Pennsylvania's I-80 application is the third, Kanjorski said. Filed in October, the application remains pending. In August, the highway administration approved an application allowing tolling to fund the construction of Interstate 73 in South Carolina. Rendell probably responded with laughter because – as Ardo pointed out – tolling Interstate 80 wasn't his idea in the first place. He wanted to lease the turnpike to raise money for mass transit and upgrades to Pennsylvania's thousands of crumbling roads and bridges.

The General Assembly came up with the idea of tolling I-80, a move that Rendell endorsed in an effort to meet transportation needs. But the compromise came earlier this year only after months of wrangling and brought strong criticism from U.S. congressmen who represent territory through which I-80 cuts.

U.S. Reps. Phil English and John Peterson, who represent districts in northwestern and north central Pennsylvania that include I-80, unsuccessfully tried to block tolling. "I don't see any expansion of tolling being acceptable to either the administration or the legislature," Ardo said.

Kanjorski said tolling I-80 seems to have happened because it affected areas with less political strength, pointing out that a far more heavily traveled highway in a more populous region, Interstate 95 through the Philadelphia area, won't face tolls.

He said his opposition to tolling I-80 differs from English and Peterson's because he offers an alternative that provides essential funding to fix roads.

"I'm trying to be an honest broker on this," Kanjorski said. "Quite frankly, the states should have the right to toll."

In a statement, U.S. Rep. Chris Carney, D-10, said he opposes tolling I-80 or any other interstate. Carney said he would work with Rendell to meet transportation needs, but his statement did not offer any specific funding alternatives.

"While Pennsylvania roads and bridges are in need of repair, tolling places an undue burden on families, small businesses and local manufacturers," Carney said. "As we grow Pennsylvania's economy, we must do so in a way that does not undercut our local economic base."

State Rep. Joseph Markosek, D-Allegheny, chairman of the House Transportation Committee, didn't reject Kanjorski's idea, but said it would take years to make it happen, pointing to how difficult it was simply to gain approval for a toll on I-80. Markosek said I-80 was chosen because the state Department of Transportation had considered the idea for several years and most of the highway's truck traffic is from out of state.

"People want to solve all the problems, but (say) 'Don't raise my taxes,'" he said. "As imperfect as it (tolling I-80) is, it was the best we could do under the circumstances."