

# Rhode Island Department of Transportation



## RhodeWorks: Editorials

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## **Editorial: Bridges too far gone for anything but full commitment to repairs**

**Providence Business News – August 22, 2015**

When Gov. Gina M. Raimondo and her administration started making the case for tolls to pay for repairs to Rhode Island bridges and roads, the arguments that ensued missed the point.

The issue should not be how to pay for the repairs but how many repairs should be done right now. As revealed in this week's cover story, "In Need of Support," temporary supports erected 15 years ago are now in need of replacement themselves. As the head of the R.I. Department of Transportation said, we have a crisis.

Rhode Island's bridges are the worst in the country, according to the federal Department of Transportation. How close we are to something akin to the 2007 collapse of the Interstate 35 bridge over the Mississippi River in Minneapolis – in which 13 people died and 145 were injured – is unknown. But should we find out?

In fact, while nearly one-quarter of the state's bridges that are longer than 20 feet (the federal government does not look at bridges shorter than that) are structurally deficient, that is, in need of replacement soon, roughly one-third more are functionally obsolete, that is, not built to current standards and in need of replacement in a longer time frame.

Today's economy still needs highly functional physical infrastructure to be competitive, and we need jobs, so what is the holdup?

The General Assembly should make plans to come back in the fall and tackle this issue so that when the construction season begins in 2016, orange barrels start popping up around the state, and bridges no longer require drivers to cross themselves before they cross them.

## Editorial: Unfinished business

Providence Journal – July 16, 2015

Senate President Teresa Paiva Weed certainly has reason to lament the fate of Gov. Gina Raimondo's plan to fix Rhode Island's bridges. Yes, the plan drew objections from the trucking industry, which opposed the call for tolls on large trucks to help pay for the repairs. But as Ms. Paiva Weed noted last week on WPRI TV's "Newsmakers," the governor — after listening to those concerns — revised the plan. Then she sent it back to lawmakers, and the Rhode Island Senate passed it by a vote of 33 to 4.

Not so in the House, where the plan never made it to the floor for a vote. Then, suddenly, on June 25, the 2015 legislation session was over.

In her "Newsmakers" appearance, Ms. Paiva Weed said she sees no point in bringing the Senate back for a special session to address the bridge plan — not when the governor and the Department of Transportation already worked hard to revise it. Ms. Paiva Weed also dismissed the idea of raising the state's gasoline tax and using that money to pay for some of the costs.

Yet clearly, more discussion is needed. House Speaker Nicholas Mattiello, after meeting with Governor Raimondo last week, said he remains concerned about the effect the proposed tolls could have on local businesses and wants to look at more options. What is the harm of that? If the plan can be improved in some way, it should be.

There is also the issue of rising costs, which will add to the price tag if the work is delayed.

Most importantly, there is the issue of safety. Twenty-three percent of Rhode Island's bridges were structurally deficient last year — the highest percentage in the nation, according to the Federal Highway Administration. Given those numbers, it would be foolish to wait another year to tackle this issue. Rhode Island's bridges need attention, and that means lawmakers still have important work to do in 2015.

As it stands, Ms. Paiva Weed acknowledged last week that the Senate will probably have to return this fall to vote on judicial nominations, and to extend a so-called Good Samaritan law that provides legal immunity for overdose victims and bystanders who call 911 or administer a medication in the case of opioid overdoses. That was another piece of important business that lawmakers left unfinished last month.

Certainly, if the Senate can return to address those issues, it should also turn its attention to the worst bridges in the nation.

## Editorial: Let's move forward

Providence Journal – June 21, 2015

Rhode Island must stop fiddling while its bridges crumble. With every month of delay, the cost to state taxpayers grows dauntingly higher. We therefore hope the General Assembly works with Gov. Gina Raimondo to move forward, as quickly as possible, with a plan to fix these ailing structures, through borrowing and tolls on big trucks.

Last week, Ms. Raimondo and the state Senate pushed a revised plan to toll large trucks. Responding to concerns about how tolls would affect the trucking industry in Rhode Island, the administration proposed \$13.5 million in new tax credits and rebates to truckers and shipping companies registered in the state, helping to offset the \$16.7 million they would pay in tolls.

The plan scales back a \$900 million revenue bond to \$600 million and finances it over 30 years through new tolls and the refinancing of some existing highway bonds. All this would be used to leverage federal aid and fix 17 bridges, including 11 on the heavily traveled 6-10 Connector.

It's an immensely expensive project, and the trucking industry is obviously concerned about higher costs for transporting goods. But, of course, taxpayers already heavily subsidize those truckers. Large trucks do the vast majority of damage to roads and bridges, but they pay only a small percentage of the cost of their upkeep, and would still do so even after the tolls were imposed.

While the Senate and governor are on board, some in the House still seem to be balking. There is talk of a special session in the late summer or fall to take up the matter, possibly connected to a deal to provide public assistance for a new AAA ballpark. We hope House Speaker Nicholas Mattiello finds a way around that. Each of these proposals should stand on its own merits, and the bridge issue must not be needlessly delayed.

Some members of the public are wary of the electronic tolls being turned against all motorists in the state's incessant quest for more money. In truth, such tolling cannot practicably be used with cars, which lack transponders in large enough numbers. In addition, there is absolutely no appetite for such a move in the governor's office, the General Assembly or the general public. The Senate legislation makes crystal clear: "These tolls shall be collected on large commercial trucks only and shall not be collected on any other vehicle."

Unfortunately, repairing these bridges is no longer a matter of if, but when. They are at risk of becoming so bad that they can no longer be repaired but must be replaced – a vastly more expensive proposition. Every month of delay arguably adds millions of dollars to the cost. Rhode Island cannot sit by while its bridges collapse and kill people – while federal fines for inaction eat away at the state's highway funds and the threat of rising interest rates makes borrowing more expensive.

This measure can be passed as easily this week as in the fall, if all sides work together.

Strong leadership with a focus on boosting Rhode Island's economy has been the hallmark of this session; we hope it continues.

## Editorial: Fix the bridges

Providence Journal – June 8, 2015

During the evening rush hour of Aug. 1, 2007, a steel truss bridge across the Mississippi River in Minneapolis collapsed, killing 13 people and injuring 145. Old and deficient bridges do collapse. Unfortunately, Rhode Island ranks worst in the nation – 50th out of 50 states – in the percentage of its bridges that are in poor condition.

The state's leaders have a responsibility to do something about that before people here are killed, a disaster that would do great harm to Rhode Island.

That is why we hope that a promising new plan to address this problem — one that enjoys the support of House Speaker Nicholas Mattiello and Senate President Teresa Paiva Weed as well as Gov. Gina Raimondo — moves forward with all due speed.

Speaker Mattiello, who joined the governor and Senate president at a press conference touting the plan, warned late last week that he and his staff need more time to look at the details before the House can move forward with authorizing it.

Mr. Mattiello is seeking more information about the impact on Rhode Island truckers, specific sites for toll locations, and what the public process surrounding implementation of the tolls would be. He also wants to know what the state's plans would be if the tolls failed to provide enough money to pay off the bonds.

All these are certainly valid concerns, given the big price tag and enormous scope of this effort.

But we would urge the governor and the speaker to work collaboratively and as quickly as possible to nail down this information and move this process along. All involved must consider what is at stake.

First and foremost is the safety of the public.

Then there is the price of deterioration: repairs become vastly more expensive if Rhode Island delays for too long.

Significant delay could put at risk \$400 million in federal matching funds.

Rhode Island also needs the economic boost that an estimated 10,000 jobs and some \$1 billion worth of work would provide.

To be sure, nothing in life is free. This money ultimately comes out of the public's pocket. All of us will be hit by the higher cost of transporting goods through Rhode Island if the proposed tolls on large trucks are authorized by legislation.

But other states toll trucks, which cause most of the damage to our roads and bridges. And no one has yet come up with a better plan for making this long-overdue work happen — something crucial to the safety and well-being of Rhode Islanders, as well as essential to commerce. Roads and bridges are an elemental responsibility of government, and poor and hazardous infrastructure is a significant deterrent to business investment in Rhode Island.

Speaker Mattiello insists that if this cannot be done before the end of the current session, it can be taken up in a special session in a matter of weeks or months. We urge all of the state's leaders to make this authorization a reality. They must not retreat from this responsibility once again, for yet another year.

## Rebuilding bridges; 'profits without prosperity'

Providence Journal – June 6, 2015

By Robert Whitcomb

Rhode Island Gov. Gina Raimondo is focusing on long-term projects that would help most people in the state, rather than “government by deal” wherein powerful groups seek taxpayer help for their special projects.

Improve public education and physical infrastructure and good stuff will follow. After all, Rhode Island already has a highly strategic location, ports, some famed educational and cultural institutions and considerable natural and man-made beauty.

“Our infrastructure is intertwined with economic development,” notes Rhode Island Transportation Director Peter Alviti.

So the governor wants commercial truck tolls on many bridges to help pay to fix roads and bridges. The plan is to issue \$700 million in state revenue bonds, to be repaid from tolls on big trucks using bridges on Interstate Highways 95, 195 and 295 and state Routes 146, 6 and 10.

That many of Rhode Island’s bridges and roads are falling apart is obvious. Bad roads and bridges of course damage the vehicles driven on them — a far better reason to avoid the tiny state than new user fees would be. Such disrepair shouts out that the state has been badly run. Bad PR!

That the Ocean State, part of which is an archipelago, ranks last in the nation in overall bridge condition seems suicidal. Big trucks do most of the damage to the state’s bridges and roads, by one estimate 90 percent.

The decline in fuel-tax receipts because of falling oil prices has meant lower revenues to fix the roads and bridges. But even if oil prices surge again, such tax revenues may never regain their previous heights because of an aging population, because younger people don’t drive as much these days and because of a city-living renaissance.

Rhode Island and Connecticut are the only states on the Northeast Corridor between Maryland and Maine with no broad-based commercial truck user fees! Rhode Island does have the Pell Bridge, whose truck tolls help maintain it and the Mount Hope Bridge. That leaves hundreds of badly maintained bridges. (Connecticut is considering re-imposing tolls; it had them for years for all vehicles on Route 95.)

The governor also wants to boost rail and bus service, including creating an express bus lane for the Routes 6 and 10 interchange reconstruction, and seeks \$400 million in federal funds for public transit. With the GOP Congress, that will be hard, but demographics are on her side.



Anger grows over many cash-rich companies' paucity of long-term investment in research, job training and pay raises for employees below the senior-executive level. Rather, increasingly selfish execs and their boards take more and more corporate earnings to buy back company shares to boost their prices to enrich themselves at accelerating rates; much of their compensation is in stock.

Many senior execs are less embarrassed than their predecessors were 50 years ago about paying themselves so much at the expense of other employees and the communities where they do business.

That's one reason for the widening income gap. Some of the here-today-gone-tomorrow execs later repair their PR by creating foundations to give away a bit of the money they have taken. But that doesn't help those they have blithely laid off and communities they have hollowed out.

Some call this stock-price "manipulation" and want to ban it. But this shouldn't be illegal in a free market, however selfish it may be. Still, out-of-control greed and short-termism are eroding the long-term competitiveness of U.S. companies. Even some on Wall Street are speaking out against it. Lawrence Fink, chairman of BlackRock, the huge asset manager, told the chief executives of the 500 biggest U.S. public companies that this "discouraging underinvesting" undermines "long-term growth."

Economist William Lazonick calls buybacks "profits without prosperity."

I spend more time these days visiting old sick people, as I prepare to join them myself. I always learn something. Not only do these people tend to be more honest than younger folks because they have little to lose in telling the truth, but they have better stories. And visiting them tends to put one's own life in clearer perspective, including its brevity.

## Editorial: Taking a toll

Providence Journal – May 31, 2015

There is no such thing as free money, and Rhode Island Gov. Gina Raimondo's plan to impose tolls on 18-wheelers trundling across the state would surely have an economic impact -- driving up the cost of transporting goods. One way or another, all of us will end up paying. But there is no way around the fact that Rhode Island's roads and bridges are in dangerously bad shape, and something must be done to repair them as soon as possible.

According to the state Department of Transportation, Rhode Island ranks dead last in America -- 50th out of 50 states -- in the overall condition of its bridges. The longer it waits to do something about it, the more repair costs will skyrocket.

At the same time, Rhode Island lags behind other states along the Route 95 corridor in imposing user fees to finance road and bridge repairs. Since big trucks account for an estimated 90 percent of the wear and tear on this infrastructure, it only makes sense for Rhode Island to get with the program.

The tolls are part of the governor's Rhode Island Works plan to spend \$4.8 billion over 10 years to fix the state's bridges and other transportation infrastructure. The tolls would help pay the costs of borrowing \$700 million to start work on 20 bridge projects, which are expected to leverage about \$400 million from federal taxpayers.

That kind of spending would have the added benefit of stimulating the state's economy and putting an end to sky-high unemployment in its construction industry. Combined with other projects on former Route 195 land, an effort to bring Rhode Island's infrastructure into the 21st century would go far toward bringing back jobs and opportunity -- especially if wedded with serious efforts, at long last, to improve the state's overall business climate.

But the impact of such work is far greater than temporary economic stimulus. Safe roads and bridges, particularly in a state as small, densely populated and with as much meandering shoreline as Rhode Island, are absolutely essential. One cannot have commerce in the modern world without them, and Rhode Island's infrastructure already gives off enough of a Third World vibe without the prospect of collapsing bridges and commuter deaths making the state a no man's land to investors.

The truckers' lobbyists may scream about tolls, but most truckers understand that safety is paramount -- and bad roads and bridges cost them dearly in expensive repairs and time lost in transporting goods.

The governor also pledges that the electronic tolls -- which are not cheap, costing as much as \$60 million to install statewide -- will not be turned against the general public.

The proposal obviously needs careful scrutiny. But, at first blush, it certainly makes sense to bring Rhode Island in line with other states and finally get serious about repairing poor and potentially dangerous infrastructure. The promise of bold leadership is why voters elected Ms. Raimondo.

## **Editorial: Tolling trucks needed for repairs but more work needs to be done**

**Providence Business News – May 30, 2015**

With their announcement last week of a plan to start tolling large commercial vehicles traveling through Rhode Island to pay for \$700 million in bridge and highway repairs over the next 10 years, the state's elected leaders have shown they understand the gravity of the situation.

It is a bold move to be sure, just not bold enough.

According to the R.I. Department of Transportation Director Peter Alviti, the program would cut in half the number of bridges deemed structurally deficient, leaving just as many not up to snuff.

There have been calls across the country to take advantage of current cheap fuel prices to add a tax to fund much needed infrastructure repairs. The scale of Rhode Island's road and bridge problems, from bad bridges to potholed city streets, requires far more than the proposed truck toll program could underwrite.

The state should still consider a dedicated gas tax to help bring Rhode Island out of the basement on so many road and bridge quality lists.

Of course, no tax should be levied without serious consideration. But when it comes to a safe and competitive infrastructure, real money must be invested. And calls to cut spending to fund the repairs reveal only a lack of appreciation for the scope of the issue.

Lastly, one positive byproduct of taking on the state's infrastructure needs would be a shot in the arm for the construction industry, which is nearly one-third below peak employment, reached right before the recession devastated the building trades. In a state that needs jobs desperately, this tax-and-spend concept would yield double benefits.