

Hubbard: Toll roads in Colorado can only go so far

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The Boulder Turnpike is going retro.

The four-lane highway between Denver and Boulder opened in 1952 and operated as a toll road until 1967. Tolling will return to the turnpike — also known as U.S. 36 — when a widening project started earlier this year wraps up in 2016.

But the highway is not completely reverting to its turnpike roots. Solo drivers are the only ones who will be charged a toll — and then only if they choose to drive in new tolled lanes.

The cash-poor Colorado Department of Transportation doesn't have the money to properly maintain existing roadways in the state, let alone add new freeway lanes.

So adding revenue-producing tolled lanes is seen as the best way to pay to widen highways and ease congestion.

Colorado — where the tax on gasoline and diesel fuel hasn't been increased in nearly 20 years — is not alone in turning to tolling.

Many metro areas now have HOT (high-occupancy toll) lanes that feature "dynamic pricing," where commuters can pay to ride in toll lanes where the price rises as adjacent "freeway" traffic increases.

A USA Today story earlier this month pointed out 12 HOT-lane projects across the country — with at least 18 more in development.

"I think they do represent the wave of the future in the 10-15 largest urban areas," Bob Poole, director of transportation policy at the Reason Foundation, a libertarian policy research group, told USA Today.

Dynamic pricing is already in place on the "managed lanes" of Interstate 25 between Coors Field and U.S. 36.

Buses, motorcycles, cars with two or more passengers and a select number of hybrids get to use the lanes for free.

But single-occupant vehicles — which account for 74 percent of all trips in the metro area, according to the Denver Regional Council of Governments — must pay for the privilege of not getting stuck in traffic. The tolls range from 50 cents during low-travel periods to \$4 during peak travel times.

The U.S. 36 widening project will add HOT lanes in each direction between Denver and Boulder. Because it's a public-private partnership, it will also promise 50 years of revenue to a private entity that steps up to invest in and manage the project.

U.S. 36 is one of several stretches of highway in Colorado where managed lanes are being looked at as a way to boost capacity and reduce congestion.

CDOT will extend the HOT lanes on I-25 up to 120th Avenue by 2015. Other highways where tolled lanes *might* be added include C-470 in the southwest metro area, Interstate 70 east of I-25 in Denver, I-270 in Adams County, Powers Boulevard in Colorado Springs, and I-70 west of Golden.

"With the reduction in CDOT's budget, erosion of spending power due to no increase in federal or state gas tax and the impact of inflation ... we're going to have to do it this way," Trey Rogers, chairman of the state's High Performance Transportation Enterprise, told the Denver Post editorial board two weeks ago.

He's right.

But tolled lanes with dynamic pricing are a Band-Aid to the larger highway problems in Colorado.

I don't mean to begrudge the smart people who've come up with a novel way to address some our transportation needs when budgetary limitations leave them no other possibility. But I continue to wonder when our public officials will have the courage to encourage voters to increase the gasoline tax or embrace innovative approaches like charging a vehicle-miles-traveled fee in order to address the obvious shortage of money for highways in Colorado.

Are tolls really the best we can do?

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