



Despite Turnpike project, Codey in no rush for toll hike

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Acting Gov. Richard Codey said yesterday that the New Jersey Turnpike Authority may be able to put off a toll increase for five years, even as the agency moves ahead on a massive \$1.3 billion expansion project in Central Jersey.

Codey said the authority can use existing revenue to get started on the project, which officials hope to complete by 2011.

Under the preliminary plan, one or two more lanes in each direction would be added to the Turnpike between Interchange 8A in Middlesex County and Interchange 6 in Burlington County. That stretch of highway is now three lanes in both directions and often becomes clogged with traffic.

"The issue of whether or not you need a toll hike: maybe five years out," Codey said yesterday during a meeting in Cherry Hill with South Jersey business leaders. "Certainly not during my 14 months. In the next term of a governor it may come."

In coming months, the Turnpike authority will get started on an 18-month, \$10 million study of the widening project.

"Until we do this study, we won't know exactly what the scope of the work is going to be and what it's going to cost," said Joseph Fiordaliso, a spokesman for the state Department of Transportation. "You've got to let the work drive the financing plan."

Transportation experts agreed the widening would not require a toll increase in the near future, especially because the various engineering studies needed for such a big job likely would take more than three years.

"If you wanted to wait five years to do a toll hike, that's plausible because the upfront expenditures are small compared to the cost of construction," said Martin Robins, executive director of the Voorhees Transportation Center at Rutgers University.

Robins said the state should put in place a financing plan right after the upcoming 18-month study is complete.

"You don't need to say there will be a toll increase tomorrow, but people do need to understand what the financing plan will be," he said. "Will there be a toll increase later on and how much?"

Business leaders and several transportation activists agree the Turnpike needs to address the chronic traffic jams that occur near Interchange 8A, near where the highway heading south narrows from five lanes to three.

Last summer, officials said, there were backups of three miles or more at the merge on 87 of 90

days.

Under Codey's plan, the Turnpike would extend the separate "car only" and "truck and car" lanes for an additional 20 miles south of where those sections now merge.

Officials said congestion problems on that stretch of the road would only get worse in 2011, after a planned link between Interstate 95 and the Pennsylvania Turnpike is completed, a project that likely would steer more traffic onto the New Jersey Turnpike.

One watchdog group, the Tri-State Transportation Campaign, said the Turnpike should reconsider whether the widening is needed for the entire 20 miles covered by the proposal.

"New Jersey has exhausted most of its sources of transportation construction funding and is going deeper into debt to keep NJ DOT and NJ Transit work going this year," the group said in a statement. "The state's bridges and highway pavement are among the worst in the country, while NJ Transit is forced to neglect key repair work in order to fund day-to-day operations.

"Is a \$1 billion highway expansion plan the state's most pressing transportation need?" the group said.

The Tri-State Transportation Campaign and other activist groups have urged the state to scrap plans for the \$400 million Turnpike extension in Middlesex County known as Route 92 and use that money for the widening project.

Codey acknowledged yesterday that the Turnpike expansion has pushed the controversial Route 92 project to the back of the pack.

"It's not off the table," he said. "It's not on the front burner now."