



## Corzine wants smaller toll hike, more savings

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BY LISA G. RYAN • GANNETT STATE BUREAU

TRENTON -- The New Jersey Turnpike Authority's plan to increase tolls on the New Jersey Turnpike and Garden State Parkway will be more modest than first proposed.

Gov. Jon S. Corzine directed authority Chairman Kris Kolluri in a Tuesday afternoon phone call to scale back the toll-hike proposal announced last month and better manage the authority's \$480 million operating budget in an effort to find savings that could then be used to finance capital projects.

"The governor's message couldn't have been clearer. The message was received with zero distraction," said Kolluri, who also is commissioner of the state Department of Transportation. "We'll get to work and come back to the governor with a new proposal."

Under the current plan, the authority would have raised the 35-cent toll on the Parkway to 50 cents next year, 75 cents in 2012 and 85 cents in 2023, which amounts to a 143 percent increase within 15 years. On the Turnpike, cars would have seen an average \$1.20 trip over 23 miles increase to \$1.80 next year, \$2.70 by 2012 and \$3 by 2023 -- a 150 percent hike.

The increases would have raised \$9.7 billion to fund widening projects, bridge repairs and ongoing maintenance on the Parkway and Turnpike, as well as provide \$1.25 billion to help fund a new rail tunnel under the Hudson River into Manhattan. The state needs to secure funding for its share of the tunnel soon or risk losing billions in federal matching funds for the project, officials have said.

In comments made after an interview on CNBC Tuesday, Corzine said the authority must zero in on its most important projects.

"I want to have a minimal increase matched against what is absolutely essential for public safety and congestion, and that maximizes how we can create jobs today," the governor said.

"We are also going to ask if they are managing the affairs of the Turnpike efficiently. Are there savings there that can help us finance some of the investments that would be made through the toll hike?" Corzine said.

### Savings sought

Corzine wants the Turnpike Authority to institute a freeze on hiring and promotions, reduce the work force through attrition and limit employees' use of authority vehicles, Kolluri said. The commissioner said the authority has been doing those things already. Since 2003, the agency eliminated 403 positions, reduced employee overtime and decreased the number of authority-owned vehicles by 117, among other things, the authority outlined in a September letter to the governor.

Kolluri said the authority's board of commissioners will be ready to present its revised proposal at an Oct. 10 public hearing at its Woodbridge headquarters, which was announced Monday. The meeting notice had indicated the authority might consider a "potential re-calibration" of the current toll hike proposal at the meeting.

Since the plan was announced, the authority has held three public hearings and received more than 1,400 written comments, Kolluri said. Reaction to the proposal has been all over the map, with some embracing the plan as necessary medicine for the state's ailing toll roads and others rejecting it as the same sort of tax-and-spend philosophy that's made New Jersey one of the most expensive states in which to live.

The governor wants authority officials to determine which capital improvement projects should stay and which should go, Kolluri said. He expects the Hudson River rail tunnel project will remain because it's important to congestion relief.

### **Rail tunnel criticized**

But the rail funding plan has its critics.

"I still believe firmly that the rail tunnel is an inappropriate use of toll revenue, and I don't think any toll increase is an appropriate action for the Turnpike Authority to be taking right now," said state Sen. Jennifer Beck, R-Monmouth. "At a time of economic crisis, the last thing you want to do is impose one of the most regressive forms of taxation on people.

"Many of my constituents have no choice but to use the Parkway and Turnpike to get to their jobs everyday," she said.

Assemblyman John Wisniewski, D-Middlesex, called Corzine's order for a scaled back toll increase "welcome news.

"The governor's pronouncements on this are very important because he's the one who ultimately approves or rejects a toll increase plan," said Wisniewski, who chairs the Assembly transportation committee.

Some type of toll hike is needed so the authority can pay its debt and meet the obligations of its bond holders, Wisniewski said. He said toll roads also have some dire repair and congestion relief needs. The assemblyman did, however, question diverting toll revenue to the Hudson River rail tunnel and urged the authority and Corzine to consider creating a public-private partnership to help fund the mass transit project.

The American Trucking Association, which includes the New Jersey Motor Truck Association, would welcome smaller toll hikes, said John Lynch, an association vice president.

"We are certainly willing to pay our fair share because nobody benefits from sitting in traffic, but we'd like to see a modest increase spread out over more years," Lynch said.

PlanSmart NJ, an advocacy group focused on sound land use planning, supports the current proposal, just as it supported Corzine's failed original plan to raise tolls 800 percent to fund transportation improvements and pay down half the state's debt. It wants to see toll revenue used for the mass transit rail tunnel.

"New Jersey is a pretty much built-out state," said Dianne Brake, the group's president. "There's no space for more roadways."