

Bristol Phoenix.



Legislators lead anti-toll charge at hearing

About 40 people filed into the Mt. Hope High School auditorium Monday night to tell Rhode Island Turnpike and Bridge Authority leaders what they think about the possibility of returning toll booths to the Mt. Hope Bridge. According to turnpike and bridge authority board chairman David Darlington, the crowd, which included eight elected state officials and three Bristol town officials, was about 160 people fewer than he had expected, but their opinions were entirely expected.

Mr. Darlington opened the meeting as a two-way street for audience members and the turnpike and bridge authority. "We are custodians of your assets. That's why we're here," he said. "We don't think we have all of the possible solutions in our report."

The contingent of officials representing the East Bay area affirmed the latter, as waves of Mt. Hope Bridge toll opposition and alternative money-making suggestions followed an opening summary of the 20-year Mt. Hope and Newport/Pell bridges plan, for which there is an estimated \$223 million shortfall.

Officials urged the authority to review all possibilities before thinking about reinstating Mt. Hope tolls, and PB Consult Inc., which includes the engineering firm and financial agency contracted by the turnpike and bridge authority to conduct a comprehensive report for its 20-year plan, did not ultimately recommend implementing Mt. Hope Bridge tolls.

State Sen. Walter Felag Jr. said there are already traffic backups caused by the traffic lights on both sides of the two-lane bridge. Tolls would only make it worse, he said.

Bristol resident Jerry Landay said he has less than fond memories of 1997 traffic backups on the Bristol side of the bridge that stretched to the Herreshoff Museum, back when tolls were collected. "What about ambulances trying to get across the two-lane bridge?" he asked. "They won't have such an *easy pass* through."

Potential alternatives for producing revenue started with Bristol Rep. Raymond Gallison Jr., who described the East Bay area as an economic engine for the state that is forgotten when it comes to getting state aid for highway and roadway repairs.

"Look into getting a cut of the gas tax," he suggested.

Sen. Felag said federal funding may be an avenue to explore.

"Let's try to work with Congressman [Patrick] Kennedy to get federal assistance," he said.

Mr. Darlington later responded that the turnpike and bridge authority had recently received \$500,000 in federal grant money for the budget, which it had been seeking for a few years. "They won't pay for highway or roadway costs," he said. "It took us a while to find the right way to ask for the money. We have other applications pending."

Bristol Rep. Douglas Gablinske expanded on the Mt. Hope Bridge naming rights solution he proposed last week.

“I talked to a Dunkin Donuts’ Center representative who said the arena will receive \$450,000 per year for 10 years from its corporate sponsor.” He said there is no doubt the Mt. Hope Bridge could gain similar revenue from a corporate sponsor.

Mr. Darlington said the turnpike and bridge authority would look into doing so, but it would have to be approved by the state general assembly.

Sen. Felag suggested they raise the Newport toll from \$2, which has not increased for 40 years through vast economic inflation.

“It was just a poor business decision to keep the Newport tolls the same for 40 years, while the price of everything else in the economy increased,” Rep. Gablinske later said vehemently.

Warren Rep. Jan Malik suggested just how drastic a Pell toll increase could be. He said New York bridges cost about \$9 each way, with local citizens getting discounts. “New Yorkers who come to our state probably laugh at the \$2 Newport toll,” he said.

One lone Mt. Hope toll supporter, Bristolian Dominique Calarco, stood up and said all the bridges state-wide should be tolled. “No one wants to pay for anything anymore. I’ll pay whatever, because it’s the only way bridges will be maintained. I just want to be safe.”

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