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Tolls could pay for better highways

BY WILL CHAPMAN PUBLISHER

There wasn't an abundance of money for highway improvements and repairs before the recent economic crisis that's dominated the news.

Then Monday, the state's secretary of the Department of Transportation and Development told a group in Lafayette, "We've got a system that does not have enough money to take care of what's existing," offering little hope that any significant efforts will be undertaken related to extending Interstate 49 through Lafayette.

Money for roads was already hard to come by, and now we've got less from fuel taxes due to high fuel prices causing less driving, and less sales tax collections from fewer car purchases due to the economic slowdown, both meaning even less money for road improvement projects.

The big rescue plan or bailout undertaken by the federal government is likely going to mean less federal highway money for projects like Interstate 49 in South Louisiana.

One way to raise money for highway improvements might be to implement tolls, not just on roads yet to be completed but on existing highways, to provide funds for new roads.

If a toll was put into place on the Lafayette to Baton Rouge corridor of I-10, or I-49 from Lafayette to Alexandria, it would mean millions of dollars that could be used to construct and upgrade better roads elsewhere, like I-49 from Lafayette to New Orleans.

And when that road was built, a toll on it could help pay for its construction, or another upgrade elsewhere.

We wouldn't want to see tolls put in place on these major arteries simply to pay for maintenance and such on regular highways. The tolls on these major roads should be dedicated to constructing and maintaining other major arteries, to upgrade our overall highway infrastructure and to provide a better base for economic stimulus.

Sure, we'd all gripe about paying \$1 to drive to Baton Rouge or to Alexandria. We'd have the option of taking other routes if we really thought the \$1 was too much.

But while we'd pay, we'd benefit from millions of dollars paid each year by people from other states, using our roads while passing through our state.

The money from these tolls could fund the highway upgrades from Lafayette to New Orleans or from Alexandria to Monroe, or others.

Besides making the roads better and safer for our motorists, the improved, upgraded infrastructure would be a real selling tool for economic development, as well as benefiting businesses already in our state.

Sure a toll road is simply a tax in another form, but it's a tax paid by those who use and benefit from the service received, in this case including millions of people from outside our state.

And without some sort of toll system, we're not likely to afford any time soon the upgrades our highway system so desperately needs.

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