

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

October 29, 2006

Free at Last!

Tolls on the Massachusetts Turnpike. Those quarters (to Ludlow) or dollars (Boston) have seemed as certain as the proverbial “death and taxes.” But a change is in the air.

Just weeks after we were all threatened with new tolls on I-291 and I-391, the Turnpike Authority voted to remove all tolls from the New York border to the Pike Extension, the Route 128 exit at Weston.

Why the changed opinion? And can it really happen?

The change comes from the difference between a legislative commission (new toll recommendation) and the decision of an actual state body (Turnpike Authority).

Tolls were supposed to end in the ‘80s, after construction bonds were retired. But instead the Authority issued new bonds and dedicated toll revenue to those new bonds. When the Big Dig came along, it seemed like we would be stuck paying for the drive to Boston forever. But one part of the Big Dig legislation, inserted by representatives from along the Pike route, mandated that revenues be maintained separately for the Boston and Western portions of the Turnpike.

Last August, when Governor Romney gained a majority on the Turnpike Board, he went to work immediately to determine the cost to remove tolls. Eric Kriss, former cabinet secretary of administration and finance, took on that task, and he just presented his report on Pike finances to the board.

They approved his recommendation to remove tolls on June 30 next year.

This is what he reported.

The bonds for “our” part of the road can be reduced through the use of reserve funds, with revenues from service plazas used as security for the remaining balance.

Tolls now provide \$114 million annually, but \$40 million goes to maintain the tollbooths and pay the toll collectors who staff them. Even though the Pike presently charges no tolls between the New York line and Springfield, the booths and collectors control access, costing more than the money they collect. Eliminating tolls before the Weston exchange would remove the booths and eliminate 200 toll-collector jobs.

MassHighway will take charge of maintenance, so its costs will increase. But former Turnpike costs stemming from separate maintenance and administration operations will vanish. And new income will flow from federal gasoline taxes, for which toll roads are ineligible.

Motorists will save time as well as money when we are released from waiting in line to get on or off the Turnpike. I do not know if the change will be sufficient to abolish the backup on summer or holiday weekends, but it will surely help.

The dollar savings for all of us who travel on the Mass Pike are significant. I look at the commute taken by my colleagues at the State House. If you commute from Cape Cod, Plymouth or Foxborough, you pay no tolls. If you commute from Salem or Newburyport, the drive is free. Taxes that are collected throughout Massachusetts pay to build and maintain those roads. It is past time for those tax dollars to pay for the road that connects our part of the state with Boston.

Bring it on!