

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Bait and Switch

I was really excited to hear last week that Governor Patrick proposed to eliminate tolls on the Mass Pike. But then I read the fine print. And then I saw what the Turnpike Board decided. It wasn't so simple.

News stories leaked out mid-week that the governor would propose eliminating tolls west of Boston. Soon after hearing that rumor, the story changed. Now it became one of toll increases, even talk of restoring tolls that were removed by Gov. Weld in the 1990's.

Here is how things stood at the week's end.

Gov. Patrick published an article in the Boston Globe last Thursday proposing to eliminate the Turnpike Authority. The Massachusetts Highway Department would take over operations west of Boston while MassPort would assume control of bridges, tunnels and the Pike extension in the city.

He proposed both to eliminate our tolls and to increase them. He would like an "entry" toll at the New York border, with the next toll station at Route 128 (now I-95) near Boston. But those are long or mid range goals. In the meantime, he wrote, tolls must increase because of outstanding Big Dig costs that have been shouldered by the Turnpike Authority.

The governor's proposals must be implemented by the Turnpike Board or the legislature or a combination of both. And the first response came on Friday.

The Turnpike Authority skipped its scheduled October meeting, and skeptics claim that the omission was intended to keep tolls from becoming an election issue. Now that election day is behind us, members are back at work. And the board voted on Friday to raise tolls, but only on the eastern part of the road. The toll-free status west of Springfield is unchanged, and our tolls remain unchanged as far east as Route 128. Beginning next spring, tolls for road, bridges and tunnels are essentially doubled from in Boston.

Those of us in Western Massachusetts should be pretty happy with the governor's proposal as it now stands. We have the bait: tolls will be removed. And the switch: not yet. Still, our tolls will not increase.

The Turnpike continues to be a thorn in the side of many commuters. As a frequent traveler to Boston, my annual tolls approach \$1,000. Workers who live west of Boston and commute daily often pay \$1,500 or more each year, and their tolls are slated to go up. Commuters from the south pay no tolls at all, though they are beneficiaries of the Big Dig.

Pike supporters cite the exemplary maintenance of the Pike as justification for the tolls. While that may be true historically, it is not true now. Potholes are now a regular appearance on the road, and small patches replace the general resurfacing that formerly maintained a smooth highway.

Governor Weld first tackled the inequities of the Pike when he removed several toll plazas. His attempts to merge the Authority with MassHighway were ignored by the legislature. Governor Romney tried again when he saw the looming deadline for risky bond investments negotiated by the independent Pike Authority. He was also rebuffed.

I will not be part of the legislature that addresses the newest gubernatorial attempt to modernize the state's arcane duplicative road system. Right now the plan is little more than a press release. Bureaucrats invested in their own organizations will fight a merger. Toll collectors, whose average annual compensation of \$70,000 adds much cost to Pike

operations, naturally object to change. And everyone seems to object to trading tolls for a gas tax increase.

My hope is that Massachusetts will bring efficiency into our highway system, retire the Big Dig debt, and keep the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority's original charge to turn its roadway over to the state. Is that too tall an order?