

SEN. BARTLE'S TOLL ROADS BILL GETS HEARING BEFORE
THE SENATE TRANSPORTATION COMMITTEE

This week the Senate Transportation Committee held a public hearing on my legislation to allow for a reasonable toll to be placed on I-70. During this hearing I had a chance to explain to the committee some of the financial realities facing Missouri as we attempt to update our deteriorating roadways.

In the past fifty years, highways have become the center of Missouri's economic engine. Millions of trucks and cars travel across I-70 alone each year, bringing with them goods for sale in our markets and stores and people traveling on vacation to destinations across the state.

Sadly, since construction started on I-70 near St. Louis fifty years ago, Missouri has not significantly updated I-70's infrastructure. The roads we now use are the same roads built in the 1950's and each year we pour money onto the existing roadways to cover potholes and cracks and crumbling shoulders, but the material underneath has not been replaced.

The material underneath, the very foundation of I-70 has broken down. We effectively drive on sand and gravel now. Worst of all, we do not have the resources available to overhaul I-70 and we won't until we can use toll roads to fund the reconstruction.

I know that there is a lot of concern out there about using toll roads. For example, people do not want to be taxed when they are using the highway to go back and forth from their home or farm that happens to sit near I-70. However, the technology of a toll road system can be designed so that local traffic does not have to pay the same amount as cross-country traffic.

People also fear that trucks and tourist traffic will divert to Highway 36 or I-80 in Iowa, yet studies show that I-70 is such a major artery for traffic between New England and Southern California that most traffic will stay on the highway. They also note that I-70 in Kansas has tolls, and they have not experienced a major drop in traffic.

Some people think that toll roads are a diversion of state funds that are already spread too thin. This is not so. A toll system on just I-70 can provide enough money to rebuild this highway and do it without competing for dollars that would be spent elsewhere.

Overall, using tolls on I-70 is a win-win situation for taxpayers and travelers. Travelers get a safer highway with potentially three lanes in each direction and a wider median to keep oncoming traffic from crossing over. Three lanes would also give more room to the ever expanding number of users on the freeway so that they are not bottlenecked between St. Louis and Kansas City.

These are some of the reasons why I have introduced and presented to the committee a bill that would give the voters the opportunity to decide if we want I-70 to be a toll road. It is time for Missouri to update the oldest interstate in America, but we cannot do it without tolls.

If you have comments or questions about this week's column or any other matter involving state government, please do not hesitate to contact me. You can reach my office by e-mail at matt_bartle@senate.state.mo.us or by phone at (888) 711-9278.