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Mass. Turnpike usage drops

Decline pushes down annual toll revenue

By Matt Rocheleau
Globe Correspondent / December 20, 2009

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The number of motorists using the Massachusetts Turnpike has dropped this year and that is pushing down toll revenue, a double dip that has not occurred since the 1974 energy crisis.

If the trend continues through the end of the year, it will be just the second time in the 52-year history of the Mass. Pike that both motorists' usage and toll revenue have fallen simultaneously. Also, after a decline in usage last year, 2008 to 2009 is on pace to become just the second time in turnpike history that fewer drivers used the highway in consecutive years.

Turnpike officials blame the recession: Fewer jobs means fewer commutes.

"The lower numbers are primarily a function of the economic climate. We are in the worst economic times since the Great Depression, and fewer drivers are using our roads," said Adam Hurtubise, spokesman for the state Department of Transportation. "Fewer vehicles on the turnpike means that the department receives less toll revenue."

As part of the recession, Hurtubise also said, fewer commercial vehicles, which pay higher tolls than passenger cars, are using the turnpike.

The drop in usage could also be related to an increase in tolls nearly two years ago. The Mass. Pike imposed 25-cent toll increases at the Allston-Brighton and Weston tolls and 50-cent increases at the Williams and Sumner tunnels in January 2008.

Hurtubise did not address the impact the 2008 toll increases had on usage. However, he said there are no current plans to raise tolls, despite this year's decline in usage and revenue.

"We are looking at ways to save money from merging the various transportation agencies into one Department of Transportation," he said.

Among some motorists, the cost of the tolls and the overall economic slump has led them to use the turnpike less to get to work, as well as to visit Boston for recreation.

"When gas prices went up, you start looking at how much you're spending. You start reconsidering everything you're paying for," said José Rivera, 44, of Milford, who estimated that he and his wife spend \$150 each month at the tolls. "But at the same time it's almost like you have no option because you have to get to work."

"I think if you talk to most people [about why they might avoid the Pike], it's the fact that you're paying that much and the money is not being used wisely," Rivera said in an interview Friday at the Framingham service plaza. "[The turnpike] has been paid for for so long, so why do we have to keep paying? . . . A lot of times it can be an hour-and-a-half to two-hour commute [from Boston

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to Milford] and a lot of times traffic has to do with the tolls. It's just a ripoff."

When he was living east of Interstate 95 and near Route 9 about a year ago, 26-year-old Eric Jones, who now lives in Somerville, would often take Route 9 westbound to avoid paying the \$1.25 toll in Weston he would be charged for having been on the turnpike for a little more than one mile.

"It would take me longer, but I thought it was ridiculous to pay that toll for about a 1-mile ride to get out of the city," Jones said, adding that for the rest of the tolls, "they're hard to avoid."

The latest available figures released last week show that from January through November, the Mass. Pike's revenue was down \$8.7 million, a drop of about 3.05 percent, compared with the same span in 2008.

Mass. Pike brought in \$255 million from tolls through the first 11 months of 2009 and the revenue is not expected to catch up with last year's \$285 million total.

The number of vehicles passing through the tollbooths - what the Pike calls "transactions" - is also down by about 2.5 million, or 1.29 percent, through November. The total number of transactions for the year are also projected to fall short of 2008's total of 191 million.

Since the turnpike opened in May 1957, both revenue and transactions have dropped together only once in the same year, 1974, during the energy crisis. That year, revenue was down a record 6 percent and transactions down nearly 5 percent.

Revenue has only dipped three times - in 1974, 2001, and 2006 - and never in consecutive years.

Because toll costs to motorists vary based on the toll's location, payment method (cash or FastLane) and the type of vehicle, the number of toll transactions do not always change from year to year the same way revenue might.

Decreased usage of the Mass. Pike fits with a national trend on all roadways.

According to data from the Federal Highway Administration, the estimated distance driven in the United States peaked around November 2007 at 3.04 trillion miles after - like the Mass. Pike's usage - decades of steady growth, with few exceptions.

However, since peaking and through May 2009, the number of miles driven nationally dropped by about 4 percent, or 124 billion, which was the largest and longest-lasting decline since a 37-percent plunge during World War II, between 1941 and 1943, based on the administration's data dating back to 1936.

Current national distance-driven figures have been rebounding since June, but are still more than 100 billion miles below the record level set in fall 2007. The number of miles driven on all roadways in Massachusetts has followed a similar pattern of decline from fall 2007 to spring 2009 with a slight rebound through September, the latest figures.

"Obviously, we've all seen the unemployment numbers and fewer people are commuting. But that aside, what we've seen across the country over the past couple of years is a decrease in the vehicle miles traveled," said Mary Maguire, spokeswoman for AAA Southern New England, which serves Greater Boston and eastern Massachusetts.

Record-high gas prices across the country during the summer of 2008 are also to blame, she said.

Tolls on the Mass. Pike, were nearly raised again this past year, after the increases at the start of 2008 did not reap as much as originally projected because of lower usage.

After 18 months of threats and three votes to raise tolls, the now-defunct Massachusetts Turnpike Authority rescinded a controversial \$100 million toll rise on June 30, the day before its scheduled implementation, and instead decided to depend on money from a higher sales tax to cover its deficit.

The canceled toll increase would have doubled rates at the harbor tunnels and increased them substantially at booths inside Greater Boston. ■

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