



Biz blasts Pike toll plan: Groups fear revenue loss of booth removal

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An election season attempt to eliminate Massachusetts Turnpike tolls west of Route 128 is getting a drubbing from an unlikely quarter: business groups.

More than a few commuters may be quietly cheering for the plan to demolish the tollbooths outside of Route 128, seen by some as a ploy by Lt. Gov. Kerry Healey to win over voters in her quest for the state's top job. The toll plan faces a final vote Nov. 15.

But a who's who of local business groups - from an organization that represents developers to a top downtown business group - are blasting plans to level the Turnpike's tollbooths.

Such a move would be a major mistake in a state with an aging and increasingly decrepit road and rail network, the groups contend.

The initial proposal, which calls for wiping out tollbooths west of Route 128, would remove up to \$120 million a year from state coffers, critics estimate.

“Up to \$120 million in revenue lost annually would seriously jeopardize our statewide transportation structure,” says Richard Dimino, head of A Better City. Formerly the Artery Business Committee, Dimino's group represents downtown business interests amid the Big Dig project.

The National Association of Industrial and Office Properties, which represents Boston-area developers, is also questioning the move.

There needs to be a thorough assessment of the state's transportation needs, which NAIOP boss David Begelfer called “substantial.”

In fact, just in the Boston area alone there are major roadway challenges, with nearly \$1 billion in repairs to major bridges. And that doesn't include major rail expansions that have been on the books as well.

“We have a backlog of investments we need to do just to keep even,” Begelfer noted. “This is a disaster. We are talking about public safety and of course, economic development.”

The Massachusetts Business Roundtable and the Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation, whose board is packed with top local executives, are also voicing serious reservations.

“This is a very bad idea,” said Michael Widmer, president of the taxpayers foundation. “We can’t maintain the highways, bridges and mass transit lines we currently have.”