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Finance panel wants to slow Pike toll removal *Says revenue cannot be lost*

By Mac Daniel, Globe
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A special state commission examining the long-term financing of transportation yesterday urged the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority and Romney administration to slow plans to abolish tolls on the turnpike west of Route 128.

The panel, which includes five members appointed by Governor Mitt Romney, said transportation financing in Massachusetts is at such a critical stage that the state cannot afford to lose the \$114 million a year that officials say the tolls bring in.

The nine members of the 13-member board who were in attendance yesterday said the removal of the tolls could work, but only if the authority finds another source of revenue.

"It's just too much money. It's a bad idea as we understand it," said Stephen J. Silveira, chairman of the Transportation Finance Commission, who was appointed by the governor. "We see no need for a rush to judgment."

Silveira said the commission views the issue as important enough to warrant a statement prior to the release of its full report on how the state should pay for expanding and repairing the state's transportation system. Many on the commission say the report will be ignored after Tuesday's election, especially if a Democratic administration takes over.

The Turnpike Authority board tentatively voted Oct. 18 to end the tolls on June 30, promising savings to thousands of commuters.

The plan also calls for about 200 toll collectors to be laid off and for taxpayers to take on the cost of running and maintaining the turnpike from Weston to Springfield.

The Turnpike Authority board is seeking legal and financial advice before its planned final approval of the proposal on Nov. 15, when the financing commission also plans to meet.

Romney spokesman Eric Fehrstrom said the authority has hired Citicorp as the investment banker and the Public Resources Advisory Group as financial adviser to develop a plan to retire the debt on the western turnpike and transfer the road to the state. He said both groups are working with Mintz Levin, the Turnpike Authority's bond counsel.

"The Transportation Finance Commission is recommending that we raise tolls and taxes to support a high-cost transportation bureaucracy," Fehrstrom wrote in an e-mail. "We

believe the better approach is to take the costs out of the system. If we don't tackle this issue now, we'll be looking at higher taxes and tolls in perpetuity."

Fehrstrom said that while the Transportation Finance Commission "was created by the Legislature and is dominated by legislative appointees," the Turnpike Authority board is more politically diverse.

The authority says it does not need approval from the Legislature to end the tolls, but a cochairman of a key legislative committee has questioned the legality of the plan's provision to borrow \$87 million against the value of the turnpike's service plazas to help repay the \$199 million the authority still owes on the western turnpike.

A group of Boston business leaders has come out against removing the tolls. " The removal of this revenue stream will only widen the gap between what we have and what is needed to adequately finance our existing and future transportation infrastructure," said Richard A. Dimino , president of A Better City.

A Romney administration report said that the collection of tolls had become too expensive and that razing the tollbooths would reduce accidents and congestion on the 72 miles of turnpike from Interstate 291 near Springfield to Route 128 near Weston. Tolls between the New York line and Springfield were eliminated for passenger cars in 1996.

To go to downtown Boston, eastbound motorists would still pay \$1 at the Weston tollbooths and another \$1 at Allston-Brighton. Westbound drivers from downtown would pay only the \$1 toll at Allston-Brighton.

The report also recommended ending turnpike tolls from Route 128 east, with the exception of the tunnels to and from Logan International Airport, by Dec. 31, 2007. That change would require approval by the Legislature.