

Charge to pass through Georgia

By Rick Maier

Road conditions deteriorate pretty rapidly as you drive north on the Interstates beyond Richmond, VA - tempers get shorter and the elegance of keeping right except to pass is lost in perpetual congestion. To make matters worse, you begin hitting a steady stream of the most aggravating revenue traps in America – toll plazas.

While collecting tolls to build highways makes a lot of sense in theory (taxing consumption or use is better than taxing income or property), primary funding for roads is suppose to come from Federal and state taxes on gasoline. But besides having too many tolls, the northeastern states have higher gas taxes (Georgia is lowest of all states at \$.26/gallon, RI is highest at \$.46/gallon). Even with the difference, the roads are much better in the South.

I doubt that tolls produce any net economic benefit to the transportation system. A big chunk of the money collected is consumed by the costs of collecting the tolls - manning the booths and administering the system. (Now there's a plum career, being a toll collector - getting soaked by wipers flinging rain and slush, taking abuse from irritated drivers, and sucking exhaust fumes all day as cars and trucks zoom away.)

Then there's the air pollution and wear and tear on cars caused by the stop-and-go lines at toll plazas. When you subtract these costs from the amount collected, you're probably close to breakeven, leaving zero value on all the time we spend waiting to pay.

On a recent trip north, I cruised on beautiful roadways for 10 toll-less hours through Georgia, the Carolinas and Virginia. The first toll - \$1 for a tunnel under the harbor in Baltimore, MD - wasn't a bad deal, but \$4 for 47 miles of turnpike in Maryland and \$2 for 11 miles in Delaware were complete rip-offs.

My trip ended in Delaware, but I imagine that highways in New Jersey, Pennsylvania and New York are even more crowded and expensive. (Sideline: Maryland is south and Delaware is east of the Mason Dixon Line. Many citizens of these border states consider themselves Southerners, but their governments have taken decidedly Yankee positions when it comes to tolls.)

The residents of Delaware I spoke with brush off tolls as unavoidable, but get excited talking about how their new EZPass devices allow them to speed through toll plazas at deeply discounted fares. I also discovered that Delaware has removed the tolls on exits within the state.

Soon, only out-of-state chumps like me will sit in line to pay full retail at tolls.

That's not right and I have a suggestion to defeat this latest wave of Yankee aggression. Our Governor should call his counterparts in the toll states and put them on notice that if they don't stop charging Georgians for using their Interstate highways, we will put toll plazas on I-75 north of Macon and on I-95 near Savannah. Fare is fair.

The Georgia toll should be \$5 per car, but in-state residents would pay only \$10 annually for a G-Pass that would allow passage at 65mph in the express lane. Following the Florida formula, we could use this out-of-state money to reduce or eliminate our own state income taxes!

Despite the exciting possibilities, I really don't want to see tolls in Georgia. Instead, the Northeastern states should follow Virginia's lead which, years ago, maintained several toll plazas on I-95 through Richmond. Not only did Virginia remove the tolls, but they built a magnificent superhighway around the city to relieve congestion – toll free.