



Reason Foundation backs Obama on tolls for highway projects



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The Reason Foundation, a libertarian think tank, is finding rare agreement with President Obama over his support for expanding tolls to help pay for new transportation projects.

"While there are a lot of things to disagree with in the president's transportation plans, the most sensible long-term solution for the Interstate Highway System is actually coming from the Obama administration, which is calling for allowing states to use toll revenue to finance the reconstruction of aging Interstate highways," the foundation wrote in a **blog post**.

Obama **included** language in the \$302 billion transportation plan he sent to Congress this spring, the Grow America Act, that would allow states to request permission to add tolls to existing highway lanes.

The think tank said Tuesday that it disagreed with most of Obama's transportation funding proposals, including using **\$150 billion** from closing corporate tax loopholes to pay for road and transit projects. But the group said Obama was right to call for lifting the current ban on using tolls on existing highways to help pay for repairs, saying it was in line with conservative ideas.

"Most conservatives claim to support principles like privatization, market pricing, and devolving functions from Washington, D.C. to the states, but apparently not in this case," the group said.

"The toll-financing approach would be feasible for all but a handful of states, with toll revenues capable of exceeding construction and maintenance costs," the Reason Foundation continued.

"Tolls should replace gas taxes on Interstates, be limited to what's needed for the capital and operating costs of the rebuilt Interstates, and be implemented only after an Interstate has been rebuilt and modernized. All tolling would be done via state-of-the-art all-electronic tolling, with no toll booths needed."

Obama's proposal would allow states to apply to the Department of Transportation (DOT) for approval to install additional tolls on existing roads. Present law requires states to construct new lanes on highways that they want to toll, with the exception of pilot programs in states including Virginia, North Carolina and Missouri.

Lawmakers have been reluctant to increase the charges on drivers in any form in the middle of an election year, opposing efforts to increase both tolling and the 18.4 cents-per-gallon gas tax that is normally used to pay for transportation projects.

The tax has not been increased since 1993, and it has struggled to keep pace with infrastructure expenses in recent years as cars have become more fuel efficient.

The debate over infrastructure spending has gained new attention with the Transportation Department warning that the Highway Trust Fund will go **bankrupt** next month unless Congress refills it. The Fund is paid for with money from the gas tax and used to reimburse states for large infrastructure projects.

Tolling advocates have argued that they are an equitable way to have drivers pay for the roads they use, like the gas tax system that has been used to pay for transportation projects since the 1930's.

"No one solution will serve as the silver bullet to fix our nation's sagging roads, highways and bridges," International Bridge, Tunnel and

Turnpike Association (IBTTA) Executive Director Patrick D. Jones said Tuesday in a statement noting that tolling would be one of several funding sources for transportation projects under Obama's proposal.

"We need many good ideas and consensus across the political aisle to achieve a long-term plan that adequately funds our country's transportation system and gives states the flexibility they need to address their unique challenges," Jones continued.

"From the gutsy proposal by Sen. [Chris] Murphy [D-Conn.] and Sen. [Bob] Corker [R-Tenn.] to increase the federal gasoline and diesel taxes to keep the federal Highway Trust Fund from going broke, to the Obama Administration's historic proposal to lift the ban on interstate tolling to help states reconstruct their interstate highways, all viable options should receive full consideration."

Opponents of expanding tolling in the U.S. offered a starkly different take on Tuesday.

"Removing longstanding barriers to interstate tolling isn't gutsy," Alliance For Toll-Free Interstates spokesman Julian Walker said in response to the IBTTA's statement.

"To the contrary, it's a cowardly, pass the buck idea presented by the president that has found no traction in Congress and has been rejected time and again by states."

TAGS: Highway Trust Fund, Gas Tax, MAP-21 Reauthorization, Interstate Highway System, Tolling

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