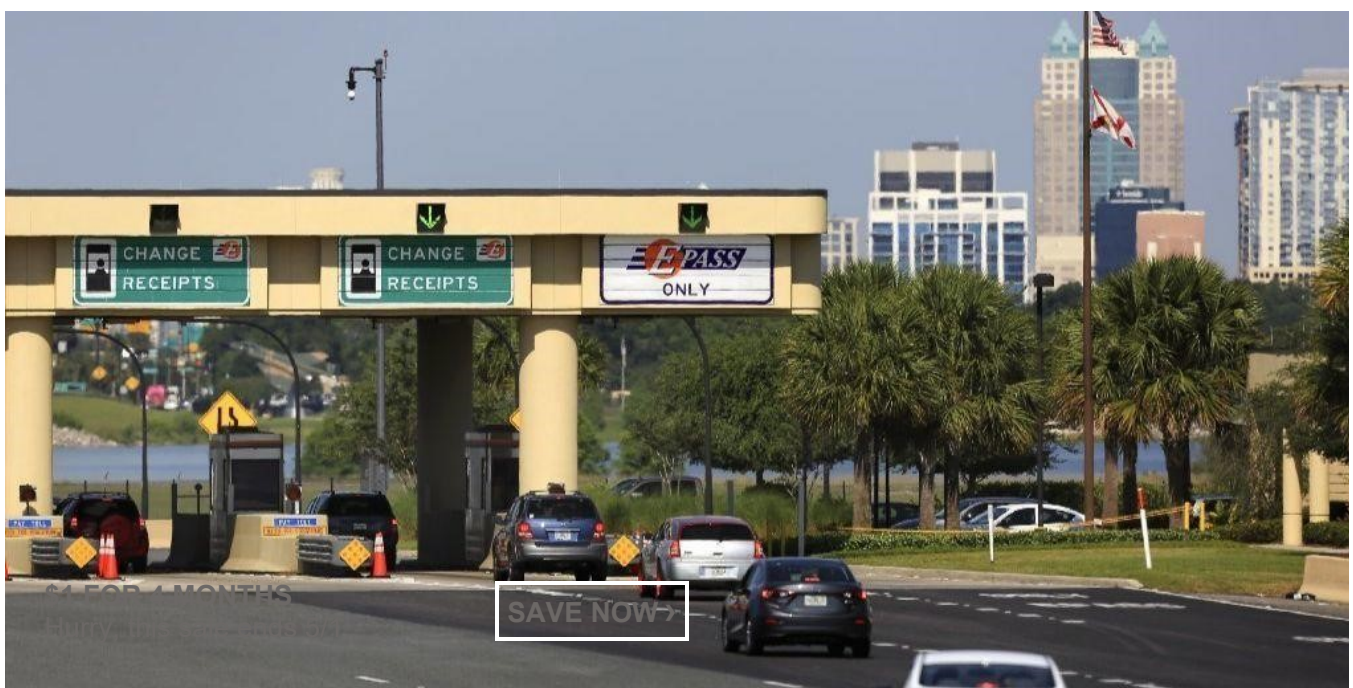


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Miami toll legislation could hurt state highway funding | Commentary





Cars head through a toll plaza on S.R. 408 toward downtown Orlando. (Orlando Sentinel)

By **Robert Poole**
Guest Columnist

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Florida is one of America’s fastest-growing states. Its policymakers have done a better job than most in keeping the state’s highway capacity growing along with population growth, primarily by supplementing fuel-tax funded highways with over 3,500 lane-miles of toll-financed expressways, beginning with the well-run Florida Turnpike in 1957. Tolloed expressways (and a growing number of express toll lanes) exist in all four of the state’s large metro areas. Yet one of the best-run urban toll systems—the Miami-Dade Expressway Authority (MDX) — is threatened with demise by a bill in the [Florida Legislature](#).

The bill would dissolve MDX, turn its five existing toll roads over to FDOT, and remove their tolls once the existing revenue bonds are all paid off, circa 2045. The bill is the latest legislative attack on MDX, which in previous years has been hit with restrictions on its tolling and mandates to transfer “surplus revenue” to the county government. This year’s effort is the strongest assault yet.

The roots of this anti-tolls fervor date back to the last decade, when MDX converted to all-electronic tolling (AET). Previously, it had charged tolls using toll booths at mainline barriers on each of its toll roads. Since there were many places to get on and off, about half the users of these toll roads paid nothing to use them. But the switch to AET “closed” the system, and all those who had enjoyed using those expressways for free had to start paying. That gave birth to the populist anti-tolls movement.

Transportation experts around the state are concerned about this. Ever since 1957 when the Turnpike opened, Florida’s transportation agencies have done an amazing job of keeping up with the state’s rapid population growth by using toll revenues to finance additional expressways and bridges. With general resistance to gas tax increases, tolling has been critically important to ensuring mobility, as Florida became the country’s third-largest state. Today, 33 Florida counties have toll roads or bridges, and motorists travel 16 billion miles a year on them. Toll road operators have \$10 billion in projects planned for completion in the coming decade, on the Turnpike and in all four major urban areas.

According to every forecast, Florida is going to keep on growing. And the vast majority of trips will continue to be made in motor vehicles, whether personal cars, ride-hailing cars and vans, or buses. So our roadway and expressway system needs to keep expanding, as well. But the idea that this growth can be paid for with less — or no — tolls is mistaken.

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Those who favor cutting back on tolling ignore a looming threat to highway funding: the coming long-term decline in revenue from gas taxes. Federal fuel economy rules will require new cars to average 54.5 mpg by 2025, more than twice as much as today. Since the gas tax is charged per gallon, that will seriously reduce gas-tax revenue, as will growing sales of electric vehicles. Ed Regan of CDM Smith consulting firm predicts that by 2045, fuel-tax revenues will be cut in half.

Two national commissions have recommended that the United States begin changing how we fund our highways. Instead of paying per gallon used, we should start paying per mile driven. That would maintain steady highway funding regardless of coming changes in vehicle propulsion, such as all-electric vehicles. Most experts agree that paying per mile should be done electronically.

In making this transition, Florida has several advantages over most other states. First, a large fraction of our expressways are already being paid for with tolls rather than gas taxes. Second, we have the statewide SunPass system, which is already compatible with electronic tolling in Georgia and North Carolina, and will soon be compatible with the E-ZPass system used by 17 states. Third, Florida is already attracting private-sector investment for toll projects, such as the I-4 Ultimate in Orlando.

Reducing the extent of tolled expressways in Florida would be a large step backwards precisely when our state needs to be preparing for the eventual phase-out of gas taxes and the phase-in of per-mile charging. We have a head start on this necessary transition. Let's not blow it via ill-considered bans or phase-outs of tolling.

Robert Poole is Director of Transportation Policy at the Reason Foundation and a member of the James Madison Institute Research Advisory Council.

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