

Residents comment on I-80 tolling study

BY: ERIN BULLER, Herald Editor



More than 50 Uinta County residents attended a public meeting at the Library on Friday to discuss the possibility of putting tolls on Interstate 80. A majority of the comments from the public were negative. HERALD PHOTO/Erin Buller

Officials with the Wyoming Department of Transportation visited Evanston on Friday to lead a discussion about the idea of implementing a tolling system on Interstate 80, a 400-mile piece of federal highway that stretches across five counties in southern Wyoming.

According to material provided by WYDOT, 13,240 vehicles travel across Wyoming per day on average, with 14,000 vehicles coming through Evanston every day.

Around half of that traffic is heavy semi-trucks, leading to damaged roads and increased maintenance costs.

The money

John Eddins, WYDOT's district three engineer out of Rock Springs, which covers all of western Wyoming, said increased traffic leads to high maintenance and rehabilitation costs, all on a reduced budget.

Eddins said each state receives funding from the Federal Highway Administration for maintenance on roads, which comes from a federal gas tax.

Eddins showed the decrease in the budget for highway projects in Western Wyoming, displaying the budget from 2007 through 2015.

The 2007 total budget was more than \$102 million. In 2008, that number dropped to around \$78.5 million.

This year it rose slightly to \$87.8 million, but that included a one-time bump of \$32 million from President Barack Obama's stimulus package this spring.

For the last three years, the state legislature also stepped in to help with funding, on top of what the state receives from the Federal Highway Administration.

Next year, the projected funding Wyoming will receive is just \$29.6 million, without help from the legislature.

“That is a drastic decrease for what projects we need to do to maintain, not just I-80, but all the highways in the area,” Eddins said. “One interstate project is about \$30 million. This is a nationwide issue.”

Eddins said current projects that need to be done in district three are projected to cost between \$100 and \$150 million, not just on I-80, but also U.S. Highways and state highways in the district.

“That’s just in this district to get caught up on projects we’ve identified now. We’re going to spend \$46 million on I-80 this year,” Eddins said.

I-80 usage

I-80 in Wyoming is used so much because it lacks high mountain passes, has low grades and is the only direct route between Oakland, Calif. and Chicago, Ill. in the northern United States, according to information from a video and slide presentation by Nick Amrhein, a consultant with Parsons Brinkerhoff charged with handling the tolling study.

According to Amrhein’s presentation, truck traffic is projected to double by 2020, which would increase the amount of wear on the road.

Almost all of that truck traffic, nearly 90 percent, travels straight through the state, Amrhein said, with an origin and destination outside of Wyoming.

Trucks cause 99 percent of damage to roadways, Amrhein said.

“Federal money to maintain the highway is insufficient,” Amrhein said.

Amrhein said the Wyoming Legislature charged WYDOT to conduct the tolling study to see if tolling would produce the shortfall in funding.

This is phase two of the study, still conceptual and preliminary, and will be presented to the Legislature in the fall.

“We were also asked to look at the concept of widening the road from two to three lanes,” Amrhein said. “That would be about a \$3-4 billion price tag, 10 or more years and be an enormous project. That would be expected to be paid by toll revenue.”

The tolling concept and costs

Amrhein said the Federal Highway Administration restricts tolling on interstates, so Wyoming would need to create new laws to allow tolling of any kind.

The state would have to apply and fit into a program that already exists for the tolling concept to even begin.

They’re looking at an all-electronic tolling concept, which would be more efficient and safer for travelers.

He said tolling places would be based on where the highest proportion of “through trips” exists.

He said one concept is to have one tolling place in the middle of the state between Rock Springs and Rawlins, “out in the middle of nowhere.”

"We want to minimize the burden on people who live in the I-80 corridor," he said.

The other concept would be to have two tolling places on each border, at the Utah and Nebraska state lines, Amrhein said.

The costs projections are based on what maximum revenues could be — three cents per mile for cars, which would total about \$9 for the whole trip across the state, and 30 cents per mile for trucks, equaling about \$115 for the trip across the state.

Amrhein stressed that these numbers and placements of the tolling places are just concepts for the study.

"Nothing is set in stone and we have decided nothing," he said. "We're halfway through the phase two study — refining costs, tolling approach and concepts, developing draft legislation and conducting public outreach."

Public meetings

Tim McDowell, the project manager with WYDOT, said they conducted five public meetings in the major cities on the I-80 corridor all last week.

"Most of the comments we've received have been very much against tolling," McDowell said.

And the comments in Evanston went right along with that trend on Friday afternoon.

Most people who commented liked the idea of a three lane interstate, but resented the idea of paying to travel in their own home state.

Several people stated that I-80 is the only route across Wyoming, after WYDOT decided years ago to eliminate the route on U.S. Highway 30.

Others asked questions about maintenance costs and asphalt versus concrete roadway costs.

McDowell stressed throughout the evening that residents be sure and write their comments down, so they can be included in the report to the Legislature this fall.

"Every comment that is written down will be connected to our report to the Legislature by city," McDowell said.

Anyone wanting to comment may do so by email at tollingstudy@dot.state.wy.us; or by regular mail to Tim McDowell, WYDOT Headquarters, 5300 Bishop Blvd., Cheyenne, WY, 82009.

For more information about the study visit WYDOT online at dot.state.wy.us/wydot/.