

## EZPass

Continued from page 1

with the consultant studies and findings. If the authority decides to start EZPass, it is not expected before 2009.

He suggested a major factor in the authority's considering EZ Pass is the finding that the usual annual fee of more than \$200,000 for its use would be about \$12,500 for the Pell toll. He said that cost difference was enough to convince the authority it might be cost effective, and should be studied further.

### Toll amount

The \$2 cash rate (for two axle autos and vans) to cross the Newport Bridge has been the same since the bridge opened in 1969. There have been no increases. Darlington said the rate in effect was decreased twice when tokens were provided at discounts of 11 tokens for \$10 or not quite 91-cents each; and then offered as 60 tokens for \$50 or not quite 84-cents each. About 10 million vehicles crossed the bridge in each of the recent years, of which only about one fifth (about two million) being cash customers, according

to authority documents.

Darlington said the authority frequently reviews the rate structure, and after all this time, consideration is given to raising the rate, but no such decision has been made. He said the impact of EZ Pass costs would contribute to further discussion about the rate, but EZPass would not automatically be the reason to raise the amount of the toll. He emphasized that the authority goals are to eliminate congestion, reduce costs and keep the toll rate the same, if at all possible.

He also stressed that the system would only have a small impact on staff because toll collectors still would be needed because of "matrix of considerations," including the continuation of cash tolls. "All aspects are being discussed, all are on the table, all are being grappled with," Darlington commented.

According to the RITBA website, the "collection equipment at the Newport/Pell Bridge is designed to accommodate the EZPass system. However, our present level of traffic does not warrant the required additional investment that would be necessary in order to participate in the system."

The chairman said EZPass costs

the operator of each vehicle up to \$35 for the device, plus whatever rate is set, possibly about 50 to 70 percent of the cash rate, or \$1 to \$1.40, of a \$2 cash rate, if it goes unchanged. The charge for each toll crossing is made to the individual's credit or debit card.

Some systems that use EZ Pass have retained their token program, but Darlington specified that the authority was not considering retaining the tokens. Some systems eliminate the cash toll also, requiring all vehicles to use EZPass, but Darlington said the authority does not see that as an option.

EZPass would also cost the authority about one percent of the credit and debit card charges made via EZPass, or about \$130,000. Based on the authority's current budget of \$13 million, that represents about 99.8 percent of its revenues being from toll income.

### Advertising

Darlington said another important consideration was the expectation that use of EZPass might



influence more people to use the bridge, and bring in enough added income to offset costs. He reported that bridge traffic "has been flat for the past five years." He also observed that toll plaza congestion has not been much of a factor, except for special events or some times of days during the busy summer tourist season.

The chairman said that advertising the convenience of EZPass was being reviewed for its possible impact of drawing more travel-

ers who would visit the area, and use the bridge, as an outgrowth of marketing. The authority also recently issued a request for proposals for the services of a marketing and public affairs firm "to have the primary responsibilities for planning, development, design, promotion and implementation of all public information and marketing initiatives" for the authority.

### The bridge

The Newport Bridge is listed in one reference work as the largest suspension bridge and the longest bridge of any design in New England. The RITBA chairman commented that the authority needs to decide about the toll collection system before its existing system and equipment becomes obsolete, especially in relation to toll operations elsewhere. "We're observers, not drivers of the process (of toll collections)," he remarked. Most Northeast toll operations have traffic and toll revenue about ten times that of the Newport Bridge, according to industry information.

The Newport Bridge income also supports the maintenance of the Mount Hope Bridge in Bristol, where tolls were discontinued in 1998.

### The system

EZPass, installed in each vehicle, sends a radio signal to the toll plaza computers that read the identity of the signal and charges a pre-paid account. Early systems, starting in the 1980s, were keyed to only one facility, but evolution enabled them to be used at multiple facilities, with relatively high accuracy.

Although several companies, or systems exist (A Pass, I Pass, I Zoom, ETC, Smart Tag, Fast Lane,

FasTrak, MnPass, PikePass, Smart Tag, SunPass, TxTag), many are using evolving technology to network and use each other's systems. Darlington said EZPass is the dominant system in the Northeast and the authority would seek an EZPass vendor if electronic toll collecting were installed here. Rhode Island is the only state on the eastern seaboard north of Virginia with toll roads that does not accept EZPass, he said. EZPass is not compatible with all systems in America, but that gap is closing, according to industry data.

Airports and parking also recently have started to use EZPass systems, and other applications are being tried or considered, such as those with commerce implications, especially in the trucking industry.

### Public response

Public reluctance has occurred with some additions of the systems, including one of the most recent in New Hampshire. Opponents there said the system costs more than the benefits; it was paired with a rate increase, seen as a back door way to raise toll rates; fears were voiced about privacy invasion because the toll and charge records document the time whereabouts of vehicles; and various reports about inaccurate billing and other malfunctions were cited.

Drivers are using, whether reluctantly or enthusiastically, the systems. Latest reports, reflecting data a year ago, are that nearly 60 percent of toll payers use the electronic options over cash and/or token payment.

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# Did you know?

## We – the voters – have a choice of where to put the Highway Barn.

### What will happen if we reject the Taylor Point Highway Barn on August 28?

- The Town Council already has a better site picked out – Lot 47 – just east of the transfer station.
- Two of the five Council members already favor Lot 47 over Taylor Point.
- The Council has approval from the General Assembly to put Lot 47 on the ballot this November if the August 28 Taylor Point referendum is voted down.

So we (and the Highway Department) won't have to wait two or three more years for another Highway Barn proposal. The Council has their Plan B ready to go. If we tell the Council on August 28 that we don't want the barn at Taylor Point, they can put the Lot 47 Barn on the ballot in November.

**So vote to REJECT the Taylor Point Highway Barn on August 28.**

**Let's give ourselves a chance to vote on Lot 47 in November.**

## You have a choice. Vote reject August 28.