

# Authority to review EZPass bids at special meeting

By Dotti Farrington

The Rhode Island Turnpike and Bridge Authority last week set a special meeting for Sept. 25 to review bids received on a study of an electronic toll collecting system, generally known as EZPass, and for updates on proposals for consultant services for finances and for public relations. Details about the bids were not available at the Sept. 12 meeting, nor in response to media requests earlier this week.

Earl "Buddy" Croft, RITBA executive director, told the authority board he had conferred with three potential bidders, and received bids from two of them to do the collection study. He has attended recent meetings of the International Bridge, Tunnel and Turnpike Association (IBTTA) and is scheduled to attend its session Oct. 1 to 4 in Vienna. The association is the worldwide alliance of about 250 toll operators and associates who promote toll-financed transportation, including through development of EZPass type collections.

RITBA agreed in August to hire a consultant to evaluate the appropriateness of using an electronic toll collection system that could cost more than \$2 million to install. The system, EZPass, is used widely in the Northeast and would replace tokens.

Authority and staff members have been collecting data on such systems for about three years. They are convinced one would provide convenience for users of their Claiborne Pell - Newport Bridge, the only toll link in the Rhode Island road system.

An electronic system is expected to mean the end of tokens, but cash tolls would continue. Specifics about the system, when it would be installed and started, and the impact on toll rates would be determined in conjunction with consultant studies and findings. If the authority decides to start EZ Pass, it is not expected before 2009.

The \$2 cash rate for ordinary (two axle) vehicles to cross the Newport Bridge has been the same since the bridge opened in 1969. Toll tokens later were introduced at 91 cents when bought at \$10 for 11, or 84 cents each when bought

at 60 for \$50. About 10 million vehicles crossed the bridge in each of recent years, of which about eight million used tokens.

RITBA wants to eliminate congestion, reduce costs and keep the toll rate the same, but preliminary details suggest the electronic rate might be more than \$1, plus the one-time device cost of \$35 per vehicle and possible credit or debit account charges to vehicle owners. The system would cost RITBA about \$130,000 annually, plus installation costs, according to estimates.

Public reluctance has occurred with some systems, including one of the most recent in New Hampshire. Opponents there said the system costs more than benefits; fears were voiced about privacy invasion because the system documents the time whereabouts of vehicles; and inaccurate billing and other malfunctions were cited.

### Other bridge items

The authority also recently issued requests for proposals for 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 consultants to handle its investment management; and for specialists to work on its emergency preparedness plans.

Croft told authority members he received inquiries for pre-proposal conferences from several leading firms, and is expecting formal submissions from two or more firms in each category by mid-October.

Other items pending include updates on building median barriers for driver safety, bids on air-conditioning (cooling and heating) for toll-collector booths, and arrangements for acquiring town water for bridge headquarters and facilities at the toll plaza to replace contaminated well water there.

RITBA also received a preliminary report from its auditor, on its budget and fiscal records for the year that ended June 30. The auditing staff said it expects to give the authority its highest rating for "successful operations and management resulting in a bottom line of \$6 million in assets, meaning a

very good year."

The auditors noted that the authority held all expenditures to under 3-percent increases, except for updated insurance on its two bridges, Claiborne Pell-Newport and the Mount Hope in Bristol. The policy provides \$250 million coverage, at a cost of \$1,317,190 for the two years, with a \$10 million deductible, on the bridge structures. The policy covers loss from flood, earthquake, terrorism and wind.

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LEGAL TIP

A person who witnesses the injury of a spouse may recover for intentional infliction of emotional distress, but a fiancée may not, the Indiana Supreme Court has ruled.

The plaintiff came upon an accident scene more than an hour after her fiancée died in a car crash. She saw police officers around his crushed car and continued on to a relative's house, where she learned he was dead. She did not see his body, which had already been removed from the scene.

The plaintiff sued the truck driver who caused the accident and his company for infliction of emotional distress, claiming that her status as the fiancée of the victim was analogous to a spousal relationship for purposes of a bystander claim.

The court disagreed.

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