

Study sees I-4 generating \$28M in tolls in 2020

By Dan Tracy, Orlando Sentinel

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Harried motorists would be willing to spend \$28 million on tolls in 2020 to get out of traffic jams on Interstate 4 through downtown Orlando, a state study has concluded.

By 2045, congestion could be so awful that drivers would fork over eight times as much money, or \$225 million, to keep moving, according to the 28-page report commissioned by the state Department of Transportation and reviewed by the Orlando Sentinel.

Those projections are key to the state's \$2.1 billion plan to overhaul the highway that serves as the transportation spine of Central Florida. Without the tolls, the ambitious project set to begin next year falls apart because the state does not have enough money to pay for it.

Gov. Rick Scott and the Legislature officially signed off on the plan this week.

"This strategic investment of more than \$2 billion will enhance safety and relieve congestion in one of the most heavily populated areas of the state," Scott said in a news release Friday.

If four toll lanes are built down the middle of I-4 as envisioned, the rates would vary — the slower the traffic, the higher the cost. The massive project is not expected to be complete until 2020.

The study, which cost more than \$562,000, anticipates a minimum charge of 15 cents a mile, with a high of 53 cents.

Under that scenario, a driver traveling from State Road 434 in Seminole County to South Street in downtown Orlando would pay \$7.70 during the morning rush hour. The return evening commute would cost \$5.60, the lower charge the result of less anticipated traffic. The total fee would be \$13.30 for a round trip of almost 25 miles.

The range of tolls is much more than that of the Orlando-Orange County Expressway Authority, which charges drivers with transponders 14 cents a mile and cash payers 16 cents no matter the time or traffic conditions.

But the proposed I-4 tolls are less than what FDOT now charges for a 10-mile stretch of lanes it operates on Interstate 95 in South Florida. The fees there range from a low of 25 cents a mile to as much as \$7.10 a mile.

Chuck Hanus of Orlando, who drives I-4 daily, said he would be willing to pay to get out of traffic, "but reluctantly and only when I really needed to get some place faster."

Employed by a brokerage firm, the 38-year-old Hanus joked that during times of top pricing, "I would hope a loan office could be available for drivers."

The promise of tolls, especially the higher one, is what the state intends to use to entice private investors to raise nearly \$1 billion to help pay for the overhaul. It would add the toll lanes, smooth out some curves, improve several side streets and add a pedestrian bridge just south of Maitland Boulevard.

Officials have about \$1.1 billion set aside or promised for the project, meaning the aspiring partner would have to come up with the rest.

So far, FDOT officials say they have fielded plenty of inquiries from the business world and anticipate bids from at least six companies.

"The interest has been strong," said Brian Peters, the agency's assistant secretary for finance and administration.

Once the road work is complete, the state would collect the tolls and use them to pay back the winning bidder, who would be responsible for building, maintaining and operating the remade I-4 from Kirkman Road to S.R. 434.

The state is following a similar plan it used with an expansion of Interstate 595 at Florida's Turnpike in South Florida. FDOT picked a Spanish construction company called ACS to put up more than half of the \$1.2 billion cost.

An arm of ACS now is widening and improving portions of I-595 and the turnpike, plus installing three toll lanes. It will be repaid over time with tolls.

The state also has used more than \$50 million it has collected in tolls to pay for the four pay lanes it created on I-95 in Miami-Dade. The lanes attracted 1.6 million vehicles during the past year, state records indicate, bringing in about \$18 million annually.

State officials have struggled for years to come up with the money to remake I-4, which was designed and built in the early 1960s and often is clogged with cars and trucks. Unlike most urban highways, I-4 has dips and pronounced bends that can slow traffic.

The infamous Fairbanks curve in the westbound lanes just north of downtown — the site of numerous accidents during rainy weather — would be smoothed out by the overhaul.

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