

Pay as You Go

Some legislators think toll roads are the wave of the future.

by [Katharine Biele](#)

Here is what you didn't know about the state's budgeting process: It's all about doomsday.

On the bright side, that's why Utah is in such good financial shape; on the gloomy side, that's why you'll have to pay more for the good stuff. Like roads—which in Utah are indeed considered good stuff, unless you're talking about the Legacy Highway, in which case you have to take Salt Lake City out of the equation.

This is a long way of saying that legislators and transportation officials are pretty excited about the idea of toll roads. Sen. John Valentine, R-Provo, has even called them the “sleeper issue” of this session, which started on the day commemorating Martin Luther King Jr., who did not weigh in on toll roads and has at least one Utah road named after him. It, by the way, is free.

So, in waking up to the call for toll roads, you should probably know how this all came about. We could go back to Greek mythology, but suffice it to say that the United States stepped into the fray in the 1790s when it started building turnpikes back East, specifically in Pennsylvania, where the whole development sparked a carnival of entrepreneurial activity to chase the almighty dollar.

That's because, even back then, you just couldn't trust the government to maintain infrastructure. Roads either weren't being built or were deteriorating all over the place until people started paying—and not indirectly—for the roads they were using.

Now comes state Sen. Sheldon Killpack, R-Syracuse, who thinks this is a dandy idea that came up a couple of years ago through a legislative Transportation Planning Task Force.

“It became apparent quickly that the resources we have available, when stacked up against the needs we have coming down the pike, aren't even on same planet,” he said.

The Utah Department of Transportation suggests that by 2030, there will be \$16.5 billion in unfunded road needs. It's a big number. Nationally, it's like \$50 billion, according to the National Chamber Foundation. Utah's state budget this year is somewhere around \$9 billion, by comparison, and its enormity is a little staggering, Killpack says.

With that budget, however, comes about \$1 billion of new revenue and surplus. Speaker of the House Greg Curtis calls it a “new dynamic” in a “unique year,” as he just about explodes with giddy anticipation of how to spend it. Sustainably, of course.

That’s the new buzzword: sustainability. That means that just because you have all this money, you don’t want to just up and spend it unless you can get some kind of productivity engine going to plow it back. This is part of the Doomsday Theory of budgeting that says a recession is always around the corner, so don’t have too much fun now.

Curtis fully appreciates the possibilities and holds up education as something that must be sustained. The problem is that the infrastructure must be continually upgraded, which also takes money, but we wouldn’t take away from education to maintain roads, would we? Just don’t think about the money in your pocket now, Curtis suggests. Think about funding on Doomsday.

“Transportation and infrastructure. It isn’t glamorous until it fails,” he told a group of policymakers recently. What that tells you is that transportation is high—very high—on the list of legislative priorities this year.

And that gives Killpack hope and incentive. At present, the main source of funding for roads is the gas tax, which incidentally hasn’t been raised for quite a while. Taxes, after all, are not a popular political item, and in a time flush with funds, are even less desirable. Besides, Killpack says even with increased driving, the tax will go down because drivers are moving to more fuel-efficient vehicles.

“Hoorah that they are; it’s a good thing for everyone. Nobody’s complaining, but we still need money to maintain the infrastructure,” Killpack says.

Rep. Becky Lockhart, R-Provo, tried to tackle the problem last year in a bill to divert the tax from sales of auto-related items to a transportation fund. Her bill was amended and weakened, and it might not have solved the problem anyway.

“Had we got the dollar amount she was seeking, we’d still be nowhere near where we needed to be,” says Killpack, who’s been looking at a big-ass plan in Texas that sounds really good to him.

This involves paving 8,000 miles of highway along the Trans-Texas Corridor, taking up to 1.6 million acres of land and nearly doubling the 5,200 miles of toll roads in the United States now, according to *InfoZine*, a Scripps Howard Foundation wire service.

Texas created a transportation commission to enter into agreements with private partners who will assume the risk of all new construction. And then they’ll run the toll roads for years to recoup their investment.

Killpack doesn't like the Colorado toll-road model because it involves a tolling authority, which would bond and then build the highways. That would create another bureaucracy, he says, and that's simply not what the Republicans are all about.

Interestingly, opponents of the Texas plan say it's all about generating money from traffic and isn't based on need, according to *InfoZine*.

Of course, the Utah corridor would be a whole lot shorter than Texas'. The proposed road would stretch 35 miles from the Salt Lake International Airport south to Pleasant Grove. If you're thinking maybe commuter lanes or light rail could solve the road problem, Killpack would disagree.

"Even those in the mass-transit business would tell you it has only a certain capacity, and it doesn't move goods and services," he says.

Which brings us to what moves those goods and services: trucks. That industry is not going to be happy with the toll-road idea of which it will bear the brunt.

Thus far, the truckers have confined their complaints to the Web, and Killpack doesn't even have his bill out yet, either. He's waiting on the enforcement provisions since there are a lot of drivers known to blow through toll roads.

Meanwhile, the Utah Taxpayers Association is OK with the idea because toll roads would be a specific type of user fee, and the government wouldn't be much involved.

"There's the issue of toll roads, and there's the issue of private-toll roads," says Mike Jerman of the Association. "We support privatization."

He's not the only one. The libertarian think tank, Reason, has done a lot of studying on this subject. What's the future? Drivers will have to buy their way on to the highways, and roads will be, well, something like concessions where businesses buy rights.

The Founding Fathers never figured on the right to drive.