



## Tolling a Valuable Option for Missouri's Transportation System

By David C. Stokes

### Summary

Missourians should consider the benefits of tolling and public-private partnerships for the state's transportation infrastructure: up-front financing, quicker turnaround for some projects, and the assurance that those who actually use a new facility will help to pay for it — leading to fewer incentives to hike traditional gas tax funds.

*Main text word count: 698*

***For some large projects, the use of a toll may be a more effective way to finance much-needed facilities.***

**Show-Me Institute Mission:**  
Advancing liberty with responsibility  
by promoting market solutions  
for Missouri public policy

What is the only tolled transportation facility in Missouri? You don't have to Google it, I'll give you the answer: It's the Lake of the Ozarks Community Bridge, built in 1998. The area had long needed a bridge connecting U.S. Business Route 54 with Shawnee Bend, but after years had passed without funding, officials determined that the only way the bridge would get the necessary financing was to build it as a tolled facility. Legislators passed the Missouri Transportation Corporation Act of 1990 with this proposed bridge in mind, allowing non-profit, quasi-governmental corporations to construct and operate tolled facilities in Missouri. So far, the Lake of the Ozarks Bridge is the only one. If you have ever used it, cutting 30 minutes off your drive around the lake, you probably found the toll to be money well-spent.

Here in Saint Louis, one intriguing fact to emerge from the difficult negotiations about the proposed new Mississippi River Bridge was that a toll bridge was at least given serious consideration. Although independent consultants determined that a tolled facility was not likely to work for this particular project, and the idea of a toll bridge was dropped — partly spurred by opposition from Illinois — the point is that there are innovative ways to finance transportation projects outside of using gas taxes and bonds. For some large projects, the use of a toll may be a more effective way to finance much-needed facilities.

Public roads are a public good, and gas taxes are a relatively fair and reasonable way to pay for them. However, tolling should be given strong consideration for certain projects, such as ones that are urgently needed before traditional funding can be secured, or projects that principally benefit a specific class of people — such as commuters or tourists. Tolling allows a quicker turnaround for some types of projects, and ensures that the people who actually use a new facility will be the ones to help pay for it.

Many Missourians may object to tolls because of their experiences waiting in long lines at old-fashioned toll collection plazas, but the old ways of building toll roads are obsolete. It no longer

requires a new government agency, or hundreds of patronage jobs for manual toll collection. New highways in California, Virginia, and locations throughout the world are being built by private companies that contract with the government, leasing the rights to operate a toll road. These new roads make extensive use of EZ Pass technology and license plate-based billing to collect tolls in a safe and efficient manner.

These “public-private partnerships” often require the selected private company to pay an up-front amount to the state, after which that company builds and operates a new highway or bridge, and collects a toll to recoup its investment. The levels of service that the government will demand from a private partner are laid out in extremely detailed contracts, running hundreds of pages. I only wish this possibility had been considered for the Page Avenue Extension connecting Saint Louis and Saint Charles counties, completed in 2003. It could certainly have been built by a private company and funded by toll payments from commuters, who are the extension’s primary users.

Back in 2000 and 2001, MoDOT officials debated how to improve I-70 across Missouri. The agency considered a new parallel toll road to the north of the current highway, but for a variety of reasons, officials settled on expanding the current highway as their preferred alternative. It is now 2008, though, and that project has not yet begun — nor is it anywhere close to beginning. Would tolls have provided the people of Missouri with a new cross-state highway option by now? There is no way to know, but the question is worth asking.

I write this not to fault MoDOT officials for the choice they made in 2001, but to encourage Missourians to consider public-private partnerships and tolled roads or bridges as important new options in addressing the state’s serious, long-term transportation and mobility needs. The future of Missouri’s economy depends of the efficient movement of goods and services. Toll roads are one way to make certain we all move forward, rather than idling in traffic.

*David C. Stokes is a policy analyst at the Show-Me Institute, a Missouri-based think tank.*

***The future of Missouri’s economy depends of the efficient movement of goods and services. Toll roads are one way to make certain we all move forward, rather than idling in traffic.***

#### **Attention Editors and Publishers**

Show-Me Institute commentaries are designed to be reprinted in newspapers and other publications. Reprint permission is hereby granted, provided that proper credit is given to the author. Electronic versions are available at the Show-Me Institute website, [www.showmeinstitute.org](http://www.showmeinstitute.org).

The author of this commentary is available for interviews. To speak with the author or other Show-Me Institute scholars, please contact:

The Show-Me Institute  
7777 Bonhomme Ave. Suite 2150  
Clayton, MO 63105

Phone: 314-726-5655  
Fax: 314-726-5656

[www.showmeinstitute.org](http://www.showmeinstitute.org)  
[info@showmeinstitute.org](mailto:info@showmeinstitute.org)