

# Area lawmaker pushes for toll-free ride

## Assemblyman from Bethlehem criticizes Thruway Authority

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One local assemblyman is trying to give area commuters a free ride.

Assemblyman Tim Gordon, I-Bethlehem, has sponsored a bill that would let local commuters drive on the Thruway between exits 22 and 24 for free.

The bill, A.7053-A, was passed in the state Assembly but must go to the Senate for passage before it can become a law. Gordon sponsored the same bill last year, which was also passed by the Assembly, but it never made it to the Senate floor for a vote, he said.

The Assembly passed Gordon's bill by a vote of 79-to-44, and he is urging the Senate to do the same.

"Rising costs in almost every area are putting more and more of a strain on all of our wallets, but this plan will help to ease costs for commuters while also helping to ease congestion on local roads," Gordon said. "Additionally, this plan has fail safes in place to ensure it will not adversely affect the state's ability to maintain the Thruway. Our families deserve immediate relief."

Gordon said because people try to avoid paying tolls on the Thruway, which he pointed out can add up to hundreds of dollars a year in some cases, drivers are being displaced onto other roads.

The assemblyman said his bill would help make local roadways safer, authorizing the Thruway Authority to issue free short-distance commuter permits between exits 22 and 24.

The bill would also give the authority the discretion to restrict the permits to use only during peak commuter hours and allow them to charge a reduced rate if the program creates too much

loss in revenue.

However, Gordon pointed out, a public hearing must be held before any fee can be put in place.

Gordon also authored legislation that provides the free commuter permits to motorists using the B-1, B-2, and B-3 Berkshire connectors (A.10179).

All of the measures are pending Senate approval before they can become law.

State Sen. Neil Breslin, D-Delmar, said he doubts the Senate will consider the bill this year or any year if a comprehensive analysis is not done.

"I don't think it has a sponsor in the Senate," Breslin said. "There needs to be some kind of proper analysis done on this."

Breslin said the Thruway relies on tolls as income in order to maintain the roadways and continually improve its services.

Gordon sent out a highly critical release of the Thruway

Authority, citing an audit by the state comptroller critical of some of the board's financial policies. The audit stated there were no plans in place to collect significantly overdue, unpaid E-ZPass tolls and fines, and no checks in place to withhold payments to state agency vendors who have E-ZPass violations.

The audit also found that the authority's Canalway Trail costs \$17 million to date, according to Gordon, and is about 40 percent over budget.

The state comptroller's office released some findings from its audit in late 2007 following the announcement by the Thruway Authority that it was seeking a new round of toll increases to take effect in July 2008, January 2009, July 2009, and January 2010.

The comptroller's report said, "The Thruway Authority should first undertake a thorough review of all policies and procedures to strengthen controls over costs and examine alternative revenue options."

Gordon sent out a release that said, "As a result of this evidence of mismanagement, he is sponsoring legislation to immediately remove the current members of the Thruway Authority Board in order to put a new board in place that will be more fiscally responsible, and effective to the needs of New Yorkers (A.10286)."

"Hard working New Yorker's shouldn't have to pay for the mismanagement of an out-of-touch board," Gordon said.

However, the Thruway Authority countered by saying it would continue to serve drivers and be fiscally responsible.

The state's Thruway Authority spokeswoman, Sara Kampf, said that in 2005, both bodies of the legislature passed the Public Authority Accountability Act, including the Assembly. The act increased the number of Thruway board members from three to seven and set term limits.

Gordon was not elected to the Assembly until 2006.

"The board is focused on its responsibility to the millions of drivers on the road each year ... and to its fiduciary responsibility to state resources," said Kampf.

The Thruway already offers discounted commuter prices through its EZ-Pass program, according to Kampf, in response to Gordon's proposed bill.

Kampf said that the board is considering acting on some of the financial control suggestions made by the comptroller, and the Thruway Authority has been holding public hearings on the matter. Hearings have already been held in Albany, Buffalo and Syracuse, and will also be held in Rochester and other locations around the state, said Kampf.