

Giving Exit 7a A Chance

by
Michael L. Bromley
copyright 2005

as published in *The Journal* of the
Society of Automotive Historians
Jan/2006

The recent passage of H.R. 3, the \$286 billion, five-year highway funding bill that politicians have called the “Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users,” arrives with the usual complaints of pork and misguided priorities. SAH *Journal* readers, for example, might be glad or otherwise to know that some \$3 million of it are headed to the National Packard Museum of Warren, Ohio, with the Henry Ford Museum picking up another mil or so. Quickly enough, though, the complaining headlines have disappeared, and the arguments will hibernate for the next half a decade. One of the few reasons anyone outside of Washington (or outside of certain museums and their congressmen) paid attention to the bill is the high price of gasoline, which is amplified, of course, by the fuel excise tax that starts with the federal share of 18.5 cents a gallon and goes from there, state to state, upwards and beyond the 25 cent squeeze in Connecticut and the 30 cent smack of Rhode Island. Moral of the story: when on the way to Maine, gas up in New Jersey, or pray for the Massachusetts line.

In the old days, to get from Washington DC to Maine one followed, variously, what is today’s Route 1. My mother recalls that her summer trips to Maine along that path took fifteen or more hours. These days, with the traffic stars aligned -- and no cops -- I can make the trip in ten hours. The savings go well beyond time: the roads are safer, the traffic flows free of stop lights, and there are no directions to follow but a simple arrow pointing North. There are, however, a couple stops on the way, for homage is due certain roads, tunnels, and bridges that defy the politics and funding of the national “freeways.” Where tolls exist along I-95 it is by legal exception to the original Interstate Highway System ban on them, and coming out of pre-existing toll roads or new projects that the federal System could not accommodate. Approaching New Jersey, though, it’s a different game. At the top of Delaware, the Interstate splits northwest towards Philadelphia, and from there dumps the traveler upon either Trenton or up Route 1 towards Princeton. Either way, there’s not a northbound blue & white sign until just before the George Washington Bridge, whereupon it’s I-95, again, straight on to Maine.

Since the now textbook-history “Dwight D. Eisenhower National System of Interstate and Defense Highways” was launched in 1956 there has been precious little debate

over its meaning. Its most vigorous opponents have merely slowed or redirected it, and have never managed to change its basic form, that of a national system of main arteries constructed by the states and financed nationally in a pay-as-you-go scheme drawn from excise taxes on motor fuels, large tires, and truck and trailer sales and use, wherever purchased or used. Sure, environmental laws have bound the program in red tape, city planners and activists one kind or another have halted an extension or two, and Congress has redirected good chunks of the revenue to mass transit and other non-highway programs, but none have remade the System, much less taken it down. Indeed, the largest obstacles to it come of the System's own success: congestion -- a.k.a., high consumer demand -- and too much revenue -- a.k.a., over-taxation. With money coming in faster than the system spends it, and untethered to its sources, the Highway Trust Fund bulges and tempts Congress to such inanity as the 6,371 "pet projects" of the latest authorization and its myriad other programs that have nothing to do with highways. Additionally, many states pay out far more than they receive back in the Federal spending. Congress, meanwhile, has given no thought to reducing the excise taxes, and solutions for congestion call for either entrenched gridlock or more roads, neither of which amounts to any real change. Back in 1956, however, there was a strenuous and successful opponent to the System whose day, amazingly, is ongoing and whose particular triumph may well arrive for the rest.

The Interstate System and its taxes are, to us today, normal. We don't worry about the nature, only the function. What is forgotten is the debate and dissent over the original idea. That it was not until 1956 that Congress acted upon a truly national system is telling enough -- for that's halfway into the Motor Age. (That it maintains the original and peculiar aspects of American federalism is equally telling -- and needs lots of pages to relate.). The Interstate System didn't just happen. Indeed, but for the hydrogen bomb it might never have happened. Of all the variables, politics, safety, economics, and so on, the one difference between 1956 and earlier periods was the Soviet threat. Serious proposals in Congress for national roads date back to the early Motor Age, and ever carried the usual arguments of general benefit, safety, and increased national intercourse. Come August of 1953 and the Russian bomb, hysteria sent the old arguments over and gave urgency to nationalized roads. Those roads would be built.

Except in New Jersey. That state, you see, didn't want the federal competition to its golden road, the world-famous, hated, envied, cursed, and beloved Jersey Turnpike. You want a quick ride through the state, you take the state's road. And you pay dearly for the honor, these days \$6.45 for a one-way run paid in cash. While New Jersey's was not the first state-wide toll road, it was far and away the most successful. From its first opening of a 40-mile stretch in 1951 the road exceeded all expectations. As a financial instrument, with bonds underwritten by tolls, the road paid magnificently, and every subsequent subscription for expansion, operations, or

repairs has been devoured by Wall Street. Traffic volume, of course, outpaced plans from the get-go, as the road's success has from day one has created more demand.

All this in defiance to the Interstate System. While New Jersey has since played the federal game with such routes as Interstates 295, 78, 278, and the I-95 designation of the upper Turnpike (that, too, a whole other story), the state has stood by its fee-based roads and protected them from the "free" competition and its not-so-free funding. Now, with the Interstate System running into walls of politics, congestion, finance, and public transit, it is to New Jersey, and not the Highway Trust Fund, that innovation turns. The turnpike is back. States with existing toll roads are re-committing to the them, and others have found order in user fees as the way through the dilemma that is the modern highway, especially for sorely needed new ones. There's a re-revolution going on. Maybe Congress will catch on in five years.

Or maybe we'll all be riding a bus. Either way, states are headed back to the 1930s and 40s, when the failures of Federal Aid inspired the turnpikes of Pennsylvania, Connecticut, New Jersey, Florida, Maine and others -- roads that built the nation as importantly as the Interstate System itself. One wonders where it'd all have gone had the New Jersey model prevailed across the nation. The Turnpike remains innovative and customer friendly, with some of the best traffic management and information and danger warning systems in the world. And while critics complain that the per-mile fee is far and away higher than what gasoline excise taxes translate to per vehicle mile, the fact remains that whenever you pump gas you are not paying for the New Jersey Turnpike. You only pay for it when you use it. As for the tolls themselves, for all the problems in its introduction, EZ-Pass is the default modern toll booth. And modern experiments in "congestion pricing" -- adjusting tolls to traffic flow -- are but a copy of an original ploy of the New Jersey Turnpike. Back in 1951, the AAA wailed and moaned that the northern portion of the road was more expensive, by the mile, than the lower half. Of course it was, went the state's unspoken reply, for therein lay the demand.

Those ninety or so minutes I give the Turnpike on my way to Maine account for a good part of the five-hour savings in my trip over what my mother used to take. It furthermore means that the gasoline tax is that much less in New Jersey, and across the land. Hate it, laugh at it, curse it -- and use it and get used to it. The turnpike is coming back.