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## More Toll Roads May Come to Texas

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*Houston Chronicle* – March 17, 2009

Transportation officials in Texas are looking at converting 83 miles of carpool lanes to high-occupancy toll lanes that solo drivers could pay a fee to use. The Metropolitan Transit Authority's board of directors discussed the proposal to convert the HOV lanes along the North, Northwest, Eastex, Southwest and Gulf freeways at its monthly meeting this week.

Metro would use approximately \$40-\$50 million of its \$92 million in federal stimulus funds for the project, and would take around two years to complete.

Metro President and CEO Frank J. Wilson said the project is intended to reduce freeway congestion and pollution, not generate revenue for the agency. "What we're trying to do here is make sure it's self-sustaining," he said. "The rates to use the lanes are set only high enough to cover operating costs of the system and are not meant to make a profit."

Wilson said Federal Transit Administration officials said last week that the stimulus funds cannot be spent on the Southeast and North light rail lines as Metro was planning, because the FTA has not given final funding approval for those projects.

## Hawaii Unveils Stimulus-Funded Projects

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**HONOLULU** – The transportation department in Hawaii has announced 22 transportation construction projects to be funded by the recent federal economic stimulus package. About \$246 million worth of projects including a new bridge, road repairs, signal upgrades and improvements to two airports are expected to create more than 3,100 jobs in the state, according to State Transportation Director Brennon Morioka.

The largest portion of the money – over \$58 million – will pay for a new home for the explosive detection systems at Honolulu International Airport. An additional \$24 million will pay for a similar project at Maui's Kahului Airport, along with \$16.7 million for pavement improvements there.

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## **Battle Looms over Idaho's Stimulus Money**

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*The Idaho Statesman* – March 14, 2009

One of the biggest battles in this year's legislative session is predicted over Idaho's economic stimulus law, which was aimed at preventing just such a fight. Senate GOP leaders are saying Gov. Butch Otter's plan does not dedicate enough federal aid to education and state employees, but so far House leaders are taking the governor's side.

Last week, the Joint Finance-Appropriations Committee set a general fund spending target of \$2.507 billion for the fiscal year that begins July 1, \$42.3 million less than Otter's most recent recommendation. It is also more than \$450 million less than last year's appropriation, a 15 percent reduction reflecting the poor state of the economy.

In the meantime, \$1.24 billion is on its way to the state in federal stimulus funding, which will primarily be spent on items specified by Congress. However, a portion is intended to make up for the government's revenue drop by aiding with state programs such as education and Medicaid.

The governor's plan includes 5 percent payroll cuts for state agencies to be paid for by the general fund, as well as keeping nearly \$80 million in stimulus funds for public schools to cover potential budget gaps over the next two years. Gov. Otter also recommended spending \$45 million in stimulus dollars on highway, water and sewer projects instead of fending off payroll cuts. His plan is expected to draw serious opposition by some state lawmakers in the coming weeks.

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## **SB580 would Toll Columbia River Bridge**

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*Daily Journal of Commerce* – March 16, 2009

A bill circulating in the Oregon Senate would impose tolls on drivers crossing the Columbia River between Vancouver and Portland. Senate Bill 580 would give the state department of transportation authority to toll Interstate bridges that span the river for the specific purpose of financing the Columbia River Crossing Project, a 12-lane bridge and light rail project currently funded by the local government.

For tolls to be collected as authorized in the bill, a tolling authority group would be established containing both Oregon and Washington transportation officials and would be responsible for determining toll rates, according to ODOT spokesman Dave Thompson. The bill would impose tolls on the existing I-5 bridge by Jan. 1, 2011, and would be exclusively electronic.

One-way toll amounts are expected to be between \$1.30 and \$3.28 in 2017 dollars, the year the bridge is planned to open. Members of the Columbia River Crossing Project Council have looked at four alternatives; using tolls for construction, maintenance and traffic control for study purposes only.

## Canada Loosens Environmental Standards for Stimulus Projects

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*Reuters - March 16, 2009*

Canada is loosening environmental regulations for infrastructure projects funded by federal economic stimulus funds, a top minister reported this week. By relaxing the rules on which projects are subject to environmental assessment, officials hope to streamline approvals for \$9.4 billion (C\$12 billion) in public spending aimed at jump-starting the country's deteriorating economy, said Environment Minister Jim Prentice.

Environmental groups quickly opposed the Conservative government's policy, which also includes delegating some assessment decisions to provinces, and would come into force immediately. Prentice added that the projects allowed to skip the Canadian Environmental Assessment Agency will not be determined by size or value.

"It's more a question of, based on the considerable experience we now have in close to 10 years of applying CEAA legislation, whether there are classes or categories of projects which do not ... have adverse environmental consequences," Prentice told reporters in Calgary. The federal cabinet will select those projects.

## UDOT meets Stimulus Deadline 15 Wks. Early

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*UDOT Press Release - March 18, 2009*

*SALT LAKE CITY* - Sixty-four percent of UDOT's 56 federally-funded highway stimulus projects, equaling \$96.5 million of the \$149.5 million allocated to Utah, have been obligated in just two weeks. The federal economic stimulus package recently signed by President Barack Obama requires all states to have at least 50 percent of their federal stimulus funds obligated within 120 days of March 3 (when funding becomes available) and all stimulus projects obligated within one year.

UDOT will have the remaining projects obligated by the end of May, making the agency one of the first in the country to have 100 percent of its projects ready to be advertised to the contractor community. Timely federal obligation is a significant milestone toward completing all of UDOT's stimulus-funded projects by the end of the year, a challenge issued by department officials.

As part of the obligation process, UDOT must submit environmental documents, project specs, cost estimates, certifications and proof of right-of-way ownership. Each project is then reviewed by the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and authorization is either granted or denied. UDOT's 56 projects are designed to maintain pavement conditions, rehabilitate and repair existing bridges and improve capacity along Utah highways.

## Proposal would Allow Local-Option Fees for Roads

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*Houston Chronicle – March 18, 2009*

The chair of the Texas Senate Transportation Committee has proposed to allow some urban counties to hold local-option elections to impose taxes and fees to help pay for bridge, road and rail projects. Sen. John Carona, a Republican, said the measure would give local communities a way to pay for road projects among increased demand and a shortage of state and federal funding.

The proposal would authorize county gasoline taxes, various fees on vehicle registration, driver's licenses, parking and a "Texas new resident roadway impact fee" of up to \$250 on vehicles that were previously registered in another state. Local voter approval would be required on all taxes, fees and transportation projects proposed.

"It is voluntary, and it does allow voter involvement," Carona said to a packed committee meeting at the state Capitol. A number of local officials from the Dallas-Fort Worth region testified in support of the legislation, saying their areas have traffic congestion and air quality problems. The communities could use the new funding to pay for transportation projects with or without issuing bonds.



*This is an interesting story given the variety of means the local officials are using to raise funds for transportation. A new method of particular interest is the \$250 "new resident" impact fee for registering a vehicle in Texas for new residents. A family with several vehicles would pay \$1500 or more. An elected official probably finds it easier to tax the constituent who hasn't yet voted as opposed to the neighbor who had a yard sign for the last campaign in front of their house. TW*

## Washington Seeks Bids for Viaduct Replacement

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*Puget Sound Business Journal – March 18, 2009*

The Washington State Department of Transportation has requested bids on the first part of the Alaskan Way Viaduct replacement. The \$15 million project to remove the southern mile of the viaduct is anticipated to begin this spring near the two Seattle sports stadiums on State Route 99, and will create 150 jobs.

This fall, the state plans to seek bids for a larger \$300 million contract for the area, according to WSDOT officials.

"This contract gets us one step closer to removing the viaduct, which begins in earnest this fall," said Paula Hammond, Washington transportation secretary, in a statement. Officials decided to replace downtown Seattle's Alaskan Way Viaduct with a \$4.2 billion deep-bore tunnel earlier this year.



*Those who have followed the AWV for the last decade will appreciate what a momentous milestone this is. Congratulations to all who have worked so hard to get this important project to this point. TW*

## **County Wants No-Hitchhiker Signs to Hit Road**

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*The Chicago Tribune – March 18, 2009*

*JACKSON, Mich.* – Officials in Michigan's Jackson County are requesting the state transportation department remove no-hitchhiker signs from the area, saying they give visitors the wrong impression when driving where some state prison facilities are located. The signs were posted in the early 1980's after a number of escapes from area prison camps where prisoners worked in unfenced fields, according to the Department of Corrections.

The county Board of Commissioners this week called for the Michigan Department of Transportation to remove the signs, since the problem of escapees has subsided. "Let's roll out a welcome mat instead of signs that scare the heck out of people," said Sherriff Dan Heyns. The state DOT said it will look into removing the signs when it receives a formal request.