

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

July 18, 1996

Freeing the Pike

“Wait until July when we get control of the Turnpike!” I have heard that exclamation often from members of Governor Weld’s administration over the past few months. July has finally arrived and, if you drive on the Turnpike, you will find that it was worth waiting for. These are the changes that are coming these first weeks of July.

The first change, the one that leads to all the rest, arrived with the expiration of Chairman Allan McKinnon’s term on the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority. With the appointment that gives his administration control, Governor Weld named James Kerasiotes chairman of the Turnpike Authority. Kerasiotes has reshaped the Massachusetts Highway Department in his years as secretary of transportation and construction, consolidating operations and modernizing procedures. He now adds the second position of turnpike chairman (without extra compensation) and tackles that oversized operation. After only one week on the job, he is already making waves.

The new administration made its presence felt initially to travelers on the Independence Day weekend. The traditional finale to a weekend at the Cape has been a long line to pay turnpike tolls, especially at the Sturbridge exit. This year, the new turnpike authority ruled that tolls would be waived at such times as the line of waiting motorists extended from the toll gat back to travel lanes on the turnpike. For the cost to the state of a few thousand dollars in lost revenue, vacationer received the benefit of a quicker trip and the added bonus of a free ride. When the backlog diminished the free ride ended and tolls were once again collected.

Another group of motorists who benefit from the new regime are the travelers who ride on the western portion of the turnpike. As of midnight last Sunday, tolls are only charged for travel between Boston and Springfield. If you are driving from Boston to New York border, your toll will therefore drop from \$5.10 to \$3.25. And if you drive from West Springfield to New York, you will pay no toll at all. If toll-free travel is your goal, you should follow Horace Greeley’s maxim, “Go West, young man.”

Toll booths will remain. They will simply collect lower receipts from motorists, while commercial and truck traffic continue to pay at the old rates. Authorities estimate a loss in revenue of \$12 million from the new structure.

The turnpike authority has a new approach to operations. Freeing the road from tolls is now a goal, and steps are in place to achieve that goal. Chairman Kerasiotes is showing his commitment to the goal by refusing the \$100,000 chairman’s salary. He is also examining all authority operations with an eye to implementing new efficiencies. An early discovery was the existence of unknown in cash on hand, money that administrators say is proof that tolls are excessive.

Tolls on the Mass Pike have been part of life since the road opened in 1957. The conventional wisdom has been that the state would never terminate a program that was responsible for so many jobs. It is exciting to see the procedures implemented that will lead the authority to fill its final mandate of retiring its debt and returning a fully paid roadway to the people of Massachusetts.