

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

December 27, 2001

Riding the Turnpike

The Massachusetts Turnpike has been the topic of many calls and letters to my office both because of attempts from Boston to re-impose tolls on the western portion of the roadway and because of growing pains involving the FastLane system. This week's Byline is devoted to both issues.

The questions of tolls result from the recurring Boston question, "How can we pay for the Big Dig?" The legislature required the Turnpike Authority to raise substantial money for that project through tolls on the Boston bridges and tunnels and on the Turnpike Extension (the roadway east of Route 128). Part of the legislation established a separate cost center for the rest of the Pike. That cost separation provided an insurance policy to prevent the use of tolls from our part of the state for the Boston project.

The policy paid off last month when the Turnpike Board, reluctant to raise Boston tolls, decided to re-impose tolls for Exits 1 - 6, exits that have been toll-free since 1996. Governor Swift rejected that proposal and eventually acted to remove the board members for their irresponsible actions. For now, the board members are fighting to retain their seats, but their actions have been stopped.

FastLane gives rise to more complicated questions, and most calls come after the Pike assesses \$50 fine. I will address some of the typical issues and invite you to call my office if you need further assistance after contacting the Turnpike.

The automated toll collection system allows drivers to avoid toll collectors by using a transponder mounted on the windshield. It is convenient for frequent travelers on either Massachusetts or other Northeast toll roads, as it interfaces with other states' automated systems. Problems arise when a driver misunderstands the technology or a sensor fails to record its usage accurately.

One constituent called because he had driven through two tollbooths before receiving any notice that his account needed replenishing. The notice was accompanied by assessment of two \$50 charges. Another received notices for misuse of the courtesy transponder that is only appropriate for travel between exits 1 and 6. Again there was a \$50 fine.

The first complaint challenged the Turnpike policy in place at the time. At the urging of both drivers and legislators, that policy was recently changed. Drivers now have the opportunity to correct deficiencies after receiving a written notice, and that constituent received a refund of his fine.

The second constituent wrote to officials documenting her actual travel between West Springfield and Lenox, a trip that carries no toll, and the Pike accepted that explanation. The tollbooth mechanism had apparently failed to record her exit from the Pike, so it charged the maximum toll for a trip to Boston.

FastLane is a significant timesaver for anyone who uses the Turnpike regularly, but it does require some attention from its users. The following tips should protect you in your relationship with the Turnpike Authority.

Set up your account to be replenished through a credit card or bank account in order to avoid a negative balance.

Look for the, green light when you pass through the tollbooth. If the booth did not "see" your entrance or exit, you may be charged the maximum toll. Request monthly statements and verify that your tolls reflect your usage. Here is a personal example: When I entered the Turnpike for a twenty-five cent trip from Springfield to Ludlow, no light verified my entrance to the roadway. I will check the next statement to see if FastLane charges me for driving the length of the Turnpike.

Call 877-MASSPIKE if you have questions, and if that doesn't work, call me. My best wishes for safe traveling and a Happy New Year.