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NY Lawmakers Let Congestion Pricing Plan Fail

NY1, NY - Apr 8, 2008

New York - Mayor Michael Bloomberg's congestion pricing plan failed to advance in the New York State Assembly on Monday, allowing the deadline imposed by the U.S. Transportation Department to expire, depriving the city of a \$354 million grant to pay for mass transit programs. Speaker Sheldon Silver, a Democrat representing the 64th District in Lower Manhattan, did not call for a vote on the plan in the Assembly Chamber on Monday, April 7, saying the measure lacked support in that Democrat-controlled house.

Mayor Bloomberg also promised an additional \$500 million in annual toll revenue for mass transit if his plan to charge drivers \$8 to drive into lower Manhattan during business hours was approved. The mayor responded through a harsh statement released by his deputy mayor, which did not name Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver by name, but did say the proposal should have been voted on, instead of being decided by one person.

"I think, you know, this is just another challenge. You've got to convince people to come along and do what is right," said Bloomberg, in a statement released by his deputy mayor Monday night. "Now I do not think that any one person should decide what's right, and if you take a look, congestion pricing was something supported by every advocacy group, every study, in fact, it was supported two to one by the public in every poll, and I think would have passed in the legislature if there had been a vote."

The mayor said it is up to the legislature to find a way to address the city's gridlock now, and a surefire way to fix mass transit. Gov. David Paterson and the head of the MTA, both advocates of the plan, discussed what the next move is for mass transit projects hoping to receive funding from congestion pricing.

"I think this was the most important thing we could be doing right now and the plan that Mayor Bloomberg put forth was a plan," said Patterson. "It might have had flaws. It might have needed some redevelopment, but it is a plan. And, frankly, no one else has come up with a plan, so that would have been a way to address this problem."

Crane Collapses cause Concern

Associated Press – April 3, 2008

Several recent crane accidents have heightened industry concerns for construction safety. Two people were injured on the roof of a building in Aventura, Florida, north of Miami, on April 3 when a small crane collapsed as they were replacing an air conditioning unit, according to Aventura police spokesman Han Maestre. The two men were moving the air conditioning unit from a small crane to a larger one when the smaller crane collapsed, injuring both men. One man suffered a broken leg and arm, and injuries to his back and neck. The second man sustained cuts on his head.

The accident occurred just a week after a crane collapse at the construction site of a high-rise condo complex in Miami, which killed two people.

The first in the string of crane collapses occurred in New York City, where seven people were killed, a townhouse was destroyed and several other buildings were severely damaged. Six construction workers and a woman died when the crane broke away from an apartment tower under construction and tumbled onto buildings as far as a block away.

An investigation of the collapse found the crane fell after a steel collar used to tie it to the side of a building fell as workers tried to install it. Twenty-four others were injured in the collapse.



We fight government regulation of virtually every aspect of our personal and professional lives. That said, a series of incidents like this one invites more oversight and regulation. As you understand statistical sampling in the QC/QA world we live in, you appreciate that these incidents probably reflect a myriad of safety violations-most of which are not caught or do not result in catastrophic consequences. The additional regulation the crane industry will get from these incidents is probably well deserved. I hope that it inspires the rest of us to avoid inviting more regulation into our lives. TW

How a Wash. Sewer Plant Cost Soared to \$1.8B

Seattle Times – March 31, 2008

Washington - While they knew it was not the most cost-efficient way to handle the area's growing sewage volume, King County officials never expected their authorization of a third sewage treatment plant could eventually cost nearly \$2 billion. The Brightwater treatment plant has roughly doubled in cost since the Metropolitan King County Council first approved the project, scheduled to open in 2011 in Snohomish County.

Many factors have made this the most expensive public works project in King County history: construction industry inflation, engineering changes and technology that exceeds federal and state environmental requirements are among them. The unfavorable nature of treatment plants forced it so far inland that a \$735 million, 13-mile pipeline is being constructed to carry treated waste to Puget Sound. The most advanced odor-controlling system in the nation, as well as parks, an \$8 million education center and \$4 million worth of artwork on the massive concrete structures have been promised to increase the reluctant tolerance of the communities near the pipeline and plant.

Everyone in the region will pay more because of the skyrocketing cost of the plant, but the buyers of new single-family homes in King and Snohomish counties are paying more than anyone else – more than \$1,000 this year on average. Aside from sewer bills, Brightwater's \$3 billion debt burden will take up to 40 years to retire.

Metro areas including Miami, Atlanta and Kansas City are spending \$3 billion to \$4 billion a piece to update aging sewer systems. However, no one in the nation is spending as much as King County for a system that will only treat 36 million gallons of water each day, said Ron Speer, a Brightwater critic and general manager of Soos Creek Water and Sewer District.



While most of our readers aren't building sewer treatment plants we couldn't resist including this story this week. It is a case study in how projects can spin out of control financially, because of incremental changes made either to accommodate those who want enhancements or to placate those who oppose the project in principle. Read the whole story found at the link below; it is worth the time. TW

http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/localnews/2004316832_brightwaternew31m.html

Washington Ferry System Tries Biodiesel

Biodiesel Magazine, ND - Apr 7, 2008

The Washington state ferry system has launched the second attempt in four years to use biodiesel blend to fuel its ferries. The Washington State Department of Transportation has partnered with a group of disparate organizations including Puget Sound Clean Air Agency, and the U.S. Department of Energy and Washington State University to experiment with using biodiesel in a marine environment.

The Issaquah, a 124-car ferry, began running on a five-percent blend of soy biodiesel on March 10 and has not had any problems so far. In 2004, the Issaquah and other ferries in the division were run on a B20 blend, but the test had to be halted because of severe clogging in the vessels' filters and purifiers.

Paul Brodeur, director of vessel maintenance, preservation and engineering for the division, said, ". . .so far we've been running successfully. We're about ready to bring our second vessel (the Tillikum) on at the end of the week. It'll be back in operation April 7." The program originally called for a 10-percent increase in the percentage of biodiesel used in each ferry every 30 days. Brodeur said they would soon decide when the Issaquah's fuel would be increased to a 10 percent blend of biodiesel, as planned.

Nearly 3 Work Zone Deaths/160 Injuries Per Day in U.S.

Occupational Health Safety, TX - Apr 7, 2008

This week, April 7-11, was the ninth annual National Work Zone Awareness Week, with "Slow for the Cone Zone," as this year's theme. The number of people killed in vehicle crashes in work zones has increased by 45 percent over the last ten years (to 1,010 in 2006), according to the Federal Highway Administration. On average, between 2002 and 2006, about 15 percent of the deaths were pedestrians, including workers and bicyclists.

The FHWA says that the U.S. averages about three work zone fatalities and nearly 160 work zone injuries every day. Approximately half of all fatal work zone crashes occurred during the day in 2006, and over twice as many fatal work zone crashes occurred on weekdays than on weekends.

Some of the tips provided by the FHWA in observance of Awareness Week include: Slow down; Keep a safe distance between your vehicle and other vehicles, construction workers and their equipment; Pay attention to signs and obey road crew flaggers.

Highway Budgets to get Pinched

Sioux Falls Argus Leader, SD - Apr 8, 2008

South Dakota - The next few years are going to be rocky for rural South Dakota roads and bridges. The state transportation department has suspended a program that allowed counties to dodge tough federal safety standards, putting more pressure on already stretched highway budgets. Building safer highways is more expensive, and less money will be left to fix bridges and smaller roads.

The 90:10 program in South Dakota allows counties to trade some of their \$10.7 million in federal highway funds to the state in exchange for 90 cents for each dollar in state funding, which is able to be spent with more flexibility. This allows counties to spend federal money on projects that would otherwise be illegible, such as short-term maintenance, bridges and stockpiling gravel. It also relaxed safety requirements for road design, making projects cheaper and quicker. The state DOT spent 90:10 on its own highway projects, which are already built to federal standards.

County highway officials say the move by the state will significantly raise the cost of some road projects, and will take away their spending flexibility, forcing local roads to be built at the federal government's standards. "It'll double the cost of doing a stretch of road," Sanborn County Highway Superintendent Lee Goergen said.

County officials are planning to make maintenance cuts, request money from other agencies and possibly convert some paved roads to gravel. The South Dakota Department of Transportation made the decision this year to halt its 90:10 program after 2009, as part of a series of budget cuts to compensate for flat income paired with rising costs.

The DOT is optimistic that Congress will provide more money for highways in 2010 and beyond, so the state can restore 90:10 some day. "We've always called it a temporary suspension," Transportation Secretary Darin Bergquist said.

IBM Receives Congestion Pricing Patent

TheNewspaper.com, DC - Apr 7, 2008

Congestion pricing charges may soon include an extra fee to IBM, according to a patent secured on January 22 by the computing corporation. Covering "variable rate toll systems," the patent encompasses the concept of charging more or less depending on factors such as peak travel times and traffic speeds.

"The present invention relates... to a system and methodology for enabling automatic adjusting of a toll amount in response to detected vehicle traffic," U.S. Patent Number 7,320,430 states. In essence, the system described monitors the average speed of vehicles traveling on a tolled section of road. When speeds drop below a preprogrammed level, say 60 MPH, a computerized system raises the toll until it is so high that fewer drivers are willing to take the pay lanes, therefore decreasing congestion in the toll lanes and increasing it in the toll free lanes. When speeds in the toll lanes rise above the predetermined levels, the tolls are reduced again to persuade more drivers to use the pay lanes.

The patent gives the computing giant the legal standing to force existing and future toll roads either to make royalty payments, or face an expensive battle in court. IBM has not announced whether it plans to enforce its legal rights with the new patent.

TollRoadsNews editor Paul Samuel, who was the first to report on the issue, argued that the first variable toll system was actually instituted in 1998 on I-15 in San Diego, long before IBM applied for the patent in 2006. "It may be a new market for IBM, but it's not new for America or for a bunch of companies who pioneered its implementation from the mid-1990's," Samuel wrote. "This sweepingly worded patent makes IBM look like a big mouth, bullying Johnny-Come-Lately."

A full copy of the tolling patent can be viewed in a 590k PDF file at the link below.

<http://www.thenewspaper.com/rlc/docs/2008/ibmtollpatent.pdf> Source: Patent Number 7,320,430 (US Patent and Trademark Office, 4/7/2008)



It's hard to believe IBM can do this. I don't think the industry will just let this happen but there could be a fight between here and there. Many such systems were in place long before 2006. TW

Lawmakers Override Gas Tax Veto

Columbus Telegram, NE - Apr 8, 2008

LINCOLN – Legislators in Nebraska voted this week to override the governor’s veto and raise the gas tax. The increase of just over a penny will go toward road maintenance and construction, at a time when the cost of construction material is rising an average of 11 percent each year and federal support is declining.

Gov. Dave Heineman scolded state lawmakers, saying the Legislature “raised taxes on every working family in Nebraska by increasing the gas tax.” He added that this comes not only at a time when gas prices are at record highs, but the cost of other goods and services are increasing as well.

The Legislature will also be asked to transfer \$15 million from the cash reserve fund over the next three years to be used exclusively on federally earmarked projects. The \$15 million will leverage nearly \$73 million in federal dollars that have been earmarked for special projects, said Sen. Lavon Heidemann, chairman of the Appropriations Committee.

Supporters of the override described the veto decision as a vital first step in the long-term solution to the highway-funding crisis. “I believe the small increase is a small step that shows the highways of the state are a priority,” said Sen. Deb Fischer of Valentine, chairman of the Transportation and Telecommunications Committee.



First we have an override in Minnesota and now one in Nebraska. This is an interesting trend and one that will likely be repeated around the country. TW

F.B.I. Investigates Kentucky Highway Projects

Kentucky Post, KY - Apr 9, 2008

Kentucky - An F.B.I. investigation of the former governor of Kentucky’s administration will include a review of how some highway projects were awarded. Marcelyn Matthews, a Department of Highways engineer under both former Gov. Ernie Fletcher and Gov. Steve Beshear has reported that the F.B.I. questioned her last month about whether the agency’s confidential cost estimates for contracts were disclosed to bidders before bids were submitted.

Transportation Secretary Joe Prather said Tuesday in a statement that the F.B.I. has requested “certain information” for its investigation into the former administration, but did not discuss details. “We’ve been asked not to comment,” he said. “I am willing to acknowledge that the investigation is ongoing, but beyond that we cannot appropriately comment.”

Houston Airport Announces \$1.2B Expansion

AviationNews.net, VA - Apr 7, 2008

HOUSTON - A \$1.2 billion expansion is making its way to the Bush Intercontinental Airport in a partnership between Continental Airlines and Houston Airport System. The renovation project will expand the airport's terminal B to nearly five times its size, adding a second federal inspections site to allow for increasing numbers of international travelers. The seven-year project will also add more gates and new regional jet facilities.

Critics of the project are concerned the new plans may go the same route as the Terminal E expansion, completed a year later than scheduled and nearly \$2 billion over budget. Original plans for the renovation estimated a cost of \$1.4 billion. Finally completed in January 2005, Terminal E cost nearly \$3.4 billion to build.

Opponents also say the Terminal B expansion is risky with airlines looking at mergers in the struggling financial market. Pittsburgh and St. Louis made considerable investments in major airport expansions for their hub airlines, and then lost those airlines from consolidation.

Larry Kellner, CEO of Continental Airlines, the dominate carrier at Bush, said Houston has the ability to control access to the growing South American and Latin markets, as well as the massive growth there. "All of those things give you a lot of confidence in the Houston hub. The Houston hub is here because of Houston and the people that support it," said Kellner. "I can't envision a scenario where that doesn't continue."

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