



# VIEWPOINT

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## Ohio Should Consider Public Private Partnership Law To Spur Transportation Improvements

by Samuel R. Staley

### Summary

*Congestion is increasing in Ohio's major metropolitan areas, threatening our state's competitiveness. State policymakers should consider two bold initiatives to address this rising problem: public private partnership to fund large scale capacity improvements and boothless tolling to ensure free flow traffic on existing roads.*

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Ohioans waste \$1.1 billion every year “stuck in traffic” according to the most recent data from the Texas Transportation Institute, and the trends are going the wrong way. Congestion is likely to get worse unless state and local policymakers seriously consider bold new initiatives to upgrade the state’s road network.

Travel demand has increased by 25 percent over the last decade, 40 percent faster than population growth. While Ohio has responded to this increase with some investment in road capacity, these efforts will likely fall short of what’s needed for the Ohio economy to remain competitive.

Commercial truck volumes are expected to grow by 60 percent by 2025 according to the Ohio Department of Transportation (ODOT), clogging our roads and raising important questions about road safety. This truck volume is fueled by Ohio’s geographically central location and four critical interstate highways—I-80/90, I-75, I-71, and I-70—crisscrossing the state.

Concern about rising congestion and safety led directly to Gov. Taft’s “Jobs and Progress Plan” that will rebuild urban interstate highways and improve safety to the tune of \$5.6 billion over 10 years.

But, this investment may not be enough. As the economy picks up commercial truck volumes may actually exceed ODOT’s projections.

Managing traffic more effectively on current highways and adding substantial new capacity will be critical for keeping congestion under control and our roads safe. In addition, while current sales taxes have filled holes in the road maintenance budget, funding for major new capacity expansions is scarce.

State and regional transportation policy makers, then, need to look at cutting edge tools for expanding road network capacity. One tool should be Public Private Partnerships.

Public Private Partnerships, or PPPs, have successfully and cost-effectively helped add capacity to clogged highway systems. In France and Australia, PPPs have funded multibillion tunneling projects, often ahead of time and below budget. A 25-mile, \$2.4 billion tollroad under construction west of Sidney, Australia by Westlink Motorway Ltd. is scheduled to open eight months early according to Tollroads News ([www.tollroadsnews.com](http://www.tollroadsnews.com)). The US Department of Transportation recently reported that public private partnerships can make project delivery up to 50 percent faster.

The leader in the U.S. is Texas, which is using PPP's to fund major expansions of its highway network to relieve congestion. Texas created Regional Mobility Authorities to develop, design, maintain, and finance major transportation projects at the metropolitan level. These regional agencies can even take unsolicited bids from private companies that believe a transportation project such as a new toll road might be financially viable!

Ohio does not have Public Private Partnership enabling legislation in place and this is probably holding up important transportation investments. Innovative projects such as a north south tollroad running along the western edge of Ohio parallel to I-75, or a truck-only toll road following I-80/90 between Toledo and Cleveland, could well become financially viable if Ohio had PPP enabling legislation in place.

But building new capacity is only one part of the solution. The other part is managing traffic on existing roads more effectively. Experiments in other parts of the nation once again serve as an example of what is possible in Ohio, particularly in areas with rising congestion such as Cincinnati and Columbus.

The key to using existing capacity more efficiently will be using boothless tolling on parts of the existing network. Rather than convert existing lanes of traffic to a tollroad where prices would be set to maintain free flow traffic, regional policy makers should consider creating High Occupancy Toll Lanes, or HOT Lanes.

HOT lanes merge the idea of a High Occupancy Vehicle (HOV) Lane, giving exclusive access to vehicles with 2, 3, or 4 passengers, with the idea that single drivers may be willing to pay for the privilege of uncongested travel.

This concept is imbedded in transportation improvements planned in Dallas and Houston, largely because two experiments in California have been so successful. In San Diego and Orange County, HOT Lanes have regulated car volume to ensure free flow traffic at peak periods while financing improvements to the tollroad and general access highways.

Thus, tolling provides a practical and workable way out of Ohio's current financial dilemma. State policymakers can improve our transportation network and infrastructure without raising taxes.

Without such bold initiatives, Ohio is likely to lag behind the nation and the world in its transportation infrastructure. Given our state economy's dependence on transportation, jobs and livelihoods may be at risk if we don't try.

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