

My Word by U.S. Rep. John Mica: Don't add tolls to free interstate lanes

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A recent Sentinel headline stated, "Mica no longer opposed to I-4 tolls in Orlando." That headline does not explain my position on tolling.

In legislation being drafted, I support a ban on tolling existing free interstate lanes, both on Interstate 4 in Central Florida and all interstates.

My position has been and will continue to be that interstate lanes currently free of tolls will remain toll-free, now and under any future legislation.

However, to expand and build more capacity on our interstate system, I support providing states the flexibility to finance the construction of any new interstate-lane capacity using the surrounding land and right-of-way. Our existing interstate right-of-way is a valuable asset, and it must not sit idle. We can provide additional capacity paid for by the user and still keep current free lanes free of tolls.

With limited resources available, the federal government must implement responsible means of paying for new infrastructure. Attracting private capital for adding lanes can allow us to maximize our highway capacity without increasing taxes.

By better leveraging our existing revenues and adding new self-paying lanes, we can improve congestion in the free lanes. My initiative represents the first opportunity in several decades for us to significantly increase capacity on the interstate system.

A successful example can be found in South Florida. Toll lanes were added in the right-of-way on Interstate 95, while the existing free lanes remained free. Before the addition of the toll lanes, the average speed on I-95 during rush hour was less than 20 miles per hour. After the toll lanes opened, the average rush-hour speed in the free lanes dramatically improved. The new lanes have improved travel conditions for all drivers.

In an era of tight budgets and significant public debt, it is vital that we reduce spending, eliminate wasteful programs, and adopt innovative policies to build additional needed highway infrastructure.

In my work to develop a new long-term transportation bill, every effort is being made to consolidate duplicative programs, devolve project approval authority to the states, cut red tape, and streamline lengthy bureaucratic processes. We can better leverage the limited transportation dollars that are available, and bring projects to completion ahead of schedule and at lower costs.

Maximizing the use of any idle highway right-of-way or capacity potential is only one idea, and I always welcome suggestions to improve our infrastructure.