

Maine is latest to toss its coin toll system

By Noah Bierman | February 8, 2009

Anyone of a certain age who went on family driving trips as a child knows the thrill and terror that come when Mom and Dad let you toss coins into the toll basket.

So many considerations. Do you throw them in one at a time or in unison, watching coins land like a rain shower of money? What about those dimes - so light - can they possibly make it all the way to the promised land? Should you show off with a hook shot from the passenger door?

Or will you miss, forcing a lifetime embarrassment for the family as you slink under the car door to find the missing nickel?

Those days are all but ending. Maine has become the latest state to abandon the coin toll baskets in favor of E-ZPass booths. The state's turnpike authority will remove the last of 21 coin baskets, in the town of Gray, in the next few weeks. Massachusetts got rid of them more than five years ago.

"I don't think we had our automatic coin baskets long enough to get nostalgic about them," said Dan Paradee, a spokesman for the Maine Turnpike Authority.

Paradee said there were more tears when the authority got rid of the system of handing out cards, in 1997, making way for an electronic toll system and the coin baskets.

The coin baskets now are going the way of the 8-track tape because the tolls went up Feb. 1 - from 60 cents to \$1. And it's really hard to find \$1 in change.

Other states have made the same decision about their coin baskets.

"There's still quite a lot of them, but the trend for them is to go," said Peter Samuel, editor of www.tollroadsnews.com.

Samuel said they took off in the 1950s, after they were introduced on the Garden State Parkway in New Jersey. But as tolls have gotten more expensive, they require too many coins, causing them to jam. Electronic tolls systems like Fast Lane and E-ZPass have taken their place.

Fewer than 10 percent of Maine drivers were using them before the recent takedown.

And some of those who did were up to "shenanigans with the coin baskets," Paradee said.

The authority got reports of drivers zooming past the booths without paying after doing "fake tosses." One driver was reported to have stopped his car at the booth every day and wander around the bucket collecting misfired change.

Toll collectors may be among the happiest to see the baskets' obsolescence. Paradee said they sometimes found foreign objects in them, including soiled diapers and pizza slices.

Long-term view

When commuter rail trains get stuck in interminable delays, as they have been prone to in recent months, many passengers send frantic e-mails to their bosses or weep silently in their plum-colored vinyl seats.

Steve Poftak, who rides in from Needham, pulls out a white paper and contemplates the problems that got our state into this mess. He is research director for the Pioneer Institute, a free-market think tank that released a study in December with a section on the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority's five-year contract with a private vendor for commuter service, which will be extended next year for another three years.

Poftak generally favors private involvement in the public sphere, a fairly controversial position in Massachusetts. So how does he answer for the chronically late trains, now operated by the Massachusetts Bay Commuter Railroad Co. under private contract?

"You have an operator who clearly has a contract that isn't long enough to make it worth their while to purchase new rolling stock," he said. "If the contract was 25 or 30 years, there would be a clear inducement to do it."

He points to the example of state skating rinks, initially leased out for three to five years. When the terms were increased to 25 years, the availability, attendance, and, investment all improved "while remaining among the most affordable in the state," he said.

It's an interesting suggestion, though it would require a complete change in philosophy. Under the current system, the T buys the train cars and locomotives, while the private contractor is responsible for maintaining them, as well as any rail and tie work. More than half of the MBTA's locomotives have exceeded the 25-year lifespan considered standard in the industry. The T has suspended an effort to buy new ones, citing the agency's financial crisis and a dispute between train builders who were competing for the contract.

Mass. Bay Commuter seems to have partially embraced Poftak's idea to improve the equipment on its own, even though its contract may expire in the next few years. The company said last week it is working on purchasing a half-dozen used 20-year-old locomotives now being surplused in Toronto, which it would lease back to the T if the sides can come to agreement.

Chuckling the aggravation

We remain at the height of winter pothole season. And if the reports from www.boston.com readers are accurate, the alignment-busting voids in the road are everywhere.

The Globe's website asked readers to send in pothole locations and wound up with a map full of red push pins, blotting out most of the city with evidence of potholes.

A coalition of environmental, business, and transit groups called Our Transportation Future is tapping into widespread frustration over bad roads in an attempt to build support for raising the state gasoline tax. In 30-second and 60-second radio ads, they are trying to make the case that spending more on better roads and mass transit would cost us less in car repairs and general aggravation.

"You wouldn't have to fix your car, and you'd get to work on time," one of the ads says.

The ad blitz begins this week. A spokeswoman for the group would not say how much the group is spending.

Idea: frequent driver plan

As the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority debates toll increases yet again this month, board member Mary Z. Connaughton has another potential suggestion to throw into the mix: a frequent driver program.

Drivers would pay a monthly or yearly fee and pass through the tolls as often as they like. Other states have similar programs.

It could take some time to figure out how much the Turnpike Authority could afford to charge on a special pass, making such a plan tricky before the toll vote scheduled for later this month.