

200 drivers part ways over toll increases

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GLOUCESTER TWP.

Public reaction was all over the map here Tuesday at a sharply divided hearing on a proposed increase in state highway tolls.

Some speakers drew applause in a Camden County College meeting room when they blasted potentially higher tolls on the New Jersey Turnpike, Atlantic City Expressway and Garden State Parkway. But others were cheered just as loudly when they supported the plan, which is meant to fund more than \$11 billion in future capital spending.

At the end, Transportation Commissioner Kris Kolluri seemed unswayed by the plan's critics.

"This is a fair proposal," he said, as some 200 people left the public hearing of the New Jersey Turnpike Authority. "It's a needed proposal and it's one that is long overdue."

Many in the audience did not see it that way, saying higher tolls were not needed and some of the proposed capital projects were ill-advised.

"Everything is going up," John Grisalfi, a Washington Township retiree, told Kolluri at the hearing. "We have a limited income. You'd better look twice or you're going to have a riot in this country."

Grace Sica, representing the Sierra Club's New Jersey chapter, said her group was unhappy that the majority of the higher toll revenue would go to widen the turnpike and the parkway.

"We'll see an increase in sprawl," said Sica, who also predicted wider highways would worsen air pollution while having no long-term impact on traffic congestion. "We'll see an increase in auto dependency."

But Marty Doyle, a Medford man who regularly travels the turnpike for his job with an auto-

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parts firm, said improvements were needed.

"If it's going to improve safety and reduce congestion, I'm willing to go along with a user fee," said Doyle, noting he loses time and money while burning gas in traffic jams.

The capital projects, including infrastructure improvements and a proposed commuter-rail tunnel under the Hudson River between North Jersey and New York City, would provide an "economic catalyst" for the state, said Kevin O'Sullivan, representing the New Jersey Building and Construction Trades Council. His remarks were applauded by several dozen audience members who wore T-shirts and baseball caps reflect-

ing union membership.

"Money is what keeps things flowing in New Jersey," said O'Sullivan. "Without the money moving, we're in dire straits."

But Dick Zimmer, the Republican candidate for U.S. Senate, said higher tolls would be an unfair burden on New Jersey families.

"The state should live within its means and use existing revenues," Zimmer said.

Several speakers withheld support for specific elements of the plan.

For instance, Michael Egenton, representing the New Jersey Chamber of Commerce said improvements were needed for the state's roads and bridges.

"One of our strengths compared to other states has always been our superior transportation system," Egenton said.

But he said the Chamber does not support using motorists' tolls to build a commuter-train tunnel.

"There needs to be more invested in mass transit," said Jane Nogaki of Marlton, representing the New Jersey Environmental Federation. "We need to be taking cars off the road."

"I guess I'm a little guy," said Fred Lederer, 75, a retired police officer from Stratford. "They should stop hurting the little guy."

The hearing was the first of three for Turnpike Authority commissioners, who ultimately are to vote on the toll hikes.

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