

# Minnesota Poll: 69% comfortable with toll roads

**Laurie Blake**

Star Tribune

Published 01/28/2004

Minnesotans may be ready for toll lanes.

More than two-thirds -- 69 percent -- of Minnesota adults like the idea of paying for new highway lanes with tolls collected from drivers who choose to use them.

Only 23 percent would prefer to increase the gas tax to build new lanes and open them to everyone.

In the metro area, where seven of 10 adults say they use the freeway system during rush hours, 4 percent of all adults say they would use a toll lane every day and 29 percent would use it at least once a week.

These are the findings of the latest Star Tribune Minnesota Poll taken Jan. 15 to 20 among 821 adults across the state.

The poll found that support for tolls is the same in the metro area as it is statewide.

The 3-to-1 preference for roads financed by users indicates that Gov. Tim Pawlenty and Lt. Gov. Carol Molnau have popular opinion behind them as they prepare to take the state into an era of toll-road building.

The Minnesota Department of Transportation this month is preparing to invite private companies to present plans to finance and build new lanes in the metro area and recoup their investment by charging drivers tolls.

Interviews with poll respondents indicate that they support tolls because the users would pay. And those who favor a gas tax increase see it as a fairer way to pay for roads.

"You don't have to use the toll road; you've got other highways you can drive on, but if you want to get out of congestion and use the toll road, that's entirely up to you," said Peter Eisenzimmer, 71, a retired bricklayer from Fridley. "We've got enough taxes as it is."

Chandra Miller, 37, of Apple Valley, a banquet planner at the St. Paul Hotel, favors toll lanes because "I think we have enough taxes. There are far too many in the state. I think we are tax-crazy in this state." Would she pay a toll? "If I commuted enough and if I saw the ends to the means. I like choices."

Brian Seek, 34, of Stacy, Minn., drives trucks in the metro area, where he gets stuck in traffic every day. He expects that, and doesn't see himself paying a toll to escape delays. But he would be happy if others had that option. "Other than work, I'm not down in the Cities. I like tolls because I wouldn't use them and I wouldn't pay for it," Seek said. "Gas is high enough the way it is without adding more taxes onto it."

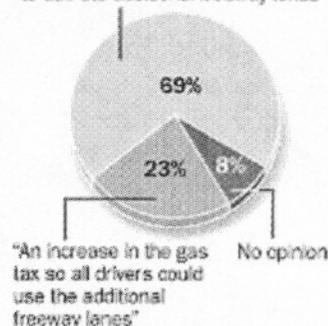
Dale Courtney, 66, of Minneapolis, is a transplant to Minnesota from Texas, where he paid a toll every day to take the North Dallas Tollway. It saved him 35 minutes to an hour over other routes.

## Toll lanes

Support same in Twin Cities metro area as statewide

*"Governor Pawlenty wants private companies to build special lanes on some metro freeways, using tolls from drivers who use these lanes to pay for construction. Others want a gas tax increase to pay for these lanes so that all drivers could use them. Which of these do you prefer?"*

"Charging a toll for drivers who want to use the additional freeway lanes"



Source: Star Tribune Minnesota Poll of 821 adults statewide by telephone Jan. 15-20. Margin of sampling error: no greater than 3.4 percentage points, plus or minus, at a 95 percent confidence level.

Star Tribune

"I am in favor of toll roads in general," Courtney said. "I think it happens to be a great way to get roads built that otherwise would not be built. I think the users should pay for the roads."

Some would prefer to pay more at the gas pump for new lanes.

"Gas prices are going up anyhow" and nobody would notice a higher gas tax, said Bob Renbille, 45, of Ramsey, a self-employed construction worker.

He said he might use a toll road "because I have no choice -- I have to get there." But he opposes tolls because "it's just another hassle. One more bill in the mail."

Nancy Carlson of Brooklyn Center, who describes herself as over 60, said she would prefer a gas tax increase because it would involve all drivers: "I think transportation is for everyone. To be fair about it, it's going to cost everybody. A toll road is very selective [and] for the affluent."

The poll indicates that those who support toll lanes include people of all ages and incomes and a nearly equal number of women and men.

But support is more widespread among people 18 to 24 years old (78 percent) and those making less than \$30,000 a year (76 percent).

A larger percentage of Republicans than DFLers favor toll lanes, and DFLers are more likely than Republicans to go for a gas tax increase, the poll indicates.

Those with a college education are most likely to back a gas tax increase. Conversely, those with less education are more likely to support toll lanes.

Molnau, who is a Republican, said the results did not surprise her. If people use something, they usually have no problem paying for it, she said.

"And tolls with new 'laneage' would be exactly that. People choosing to use them would pay for them."

Molnau said she believes that people are starting to understand that raising the 20-cent gas tax high enough to take care of all the state's transportation needs "politically and otherwise just wouldn't happen."

The DFL-led Senate has long favored an increase in the state's gas tax as a way to provide a long-term increase in transportation funding.

Sen. Steve Murphy, DFL-Red Wing, the new chairman of the Senate Transportation Committee, said the poll results do not necessarily mean people would oppose a gas tax increase if they knew exactly how the money would be spent.

"I understand people's response to that: I don't drive on [Interstate Hwy] 694, so go ahead and put up a toll lane," Murphy said. "That would be fine with me. That's the way people feel about taxes in general."

Sen. Dean Johnson, DFL-Willmar, and the new Senate majority leader, said the poll reflects a shift in sentiments because almost 200 organizations statewide have supported a 3-to 5-cent increase in the gas tax over the past three years. Johnson said tolls may work in the metro area but aren't a solution for outstate Minnesota's transportation needs.

*Laurie Blake is at [lblake@startribune.com](mailto:lblake@startribune.com).*