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Keep toll roads as a state option

William Ankner, secretary of the Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development, says toll roads should be an option in roadway development in these troubled economic times.

We share Ankner's belief that tolls should be on the table when ways to fund road projects are discussed.

Controversy over consideration of toll roads is almost a certainty. When former state Transportation Secretary Johnny Bradberry filed a request with federal officials to impose tolls on interstates 10 and 12, a firestorm of criticism erupted.

In other parts of the nation, however, there is an increase in toll roads because tax financing is not producing good highways. Federal highway grants have become so complicated in their attached "strings" that many state governments encourage toll-financing.

Texas, Colorado, California, Virginia, Georgia, Minnesota, Oregon, Arizona, South Carolina, Washington, Nevada and other states are actively pursuing toll projects.

Houston and other cities have had great success in building toll roads to relieve massive congestion.

Lafayette is an example of a city that is moving at a much faster pace than its infrastructure. In 2003, a study by *The Advertiser* showed that traffic counts on key portions of eight major thoroughfares had increased at least 50 percent. The growth continues.

The most practical solution that we have seen was offered by former State Rep. Jerry LeBlanc. He pushed a bill that set up an expressway authority empowered to build the long-delayed north-south loop as a toll road.

The Road Information Program, which has ranked Louisiana's roads as the second-worst in the nation, said in a recent report that nearly half of Louisiana's major roads and highways are in poor or mediocre condition.

The TRIP report examined the condition, use, safety and funding of Louisiana's roads and bridges - as well as the state's ability to meet future mobility and traffic- safety needs.

Based on state and federal data, TRIP assigned the following letter grades to the system's components: roads, F; bridges, D-; congestion, C; safety, F; and funding, D.

TRIP found that congestion levels in Louisiana are rising because traffic is increasing faster than roadway capacity.

One of the report's key findings is that 22 percent of Louisiana's major roads are in poor condition.

William M. Wilkins, TRIP's executive director, asks if the state can develop and maintain a "modern transportation system that can accommodate the state's growth and increased vehicle travel to foster economic development."

We would like to see that done without financing from tolls, but we should leave the toll option open. The massive problems with Louisiana's streets and roads demand that every possibility be considered.
