

STATEMENT BY:
SENATOR JOSH PENRY
SB 108 – Governor Ritter’s “FASTER” transportation bill
February 5, 2009

Yesterday’s debate on Governor Ritter’s FASTER plan highlighted some important areas of agreement and equally stark areas of disagreement.

First the areas of agreement: everyone in this body believes that Colorado has an obligation to fix unsafe bridges – there’s 126 of them, and we all agree they should be fixed.

I also think there’s basic agreement in this body that transportation gets short shrift and the short end of the budgeting stick in Colorado. Under the terms of our budget, transportation gets the last dollar of general fund when times are good, and it is the first dollar to get axed during periods of budget shortage like these. That’s why the Governor’s budget has about \$400 million less in its budget for roads and bridges this year than it did last.

So we all agree on these two fundamental points – and they are not unimportant areas of disagreement. Candidly, after watching this General Assembly whittle away transportation funding over the last few years – even during a period of budget surpluses – it is nice to see our governing party focused on road funding.

And yesterday, we saw a number of proposals to fix those failing bridges. For our part, Republicans have offered up a range of options that total nearly \$2 billion over the next decade – a statement of our real commitment to building better roads and bridges across this state.

Now...these areas of agreement don’t obscure in any way the significant areas where we disagree.

The FASTER plan authored by the Governor which we debate here today calls for large fee increases on motorists of all shapes and sizes – between 41 and 60 dollars of new fees for each and every car on top of the existing state and local fees we already pay.

We believe that, in these difficult economic times, this General Assembly should keep new fees to an absolute minimum. Many Republicans were prepared to support a more conservative approach to new revenues; Colleagues, this approach flatly isn’t conservative. It’s a plan that asks every motorist in Colorado to swallow another big new fee at a time when the economy is in tail spin and families and businesses don’t have a lot of extra money sitting around.

Next, this FASTER plan directs CDOT to seek out waivers so that the State of Colorado can toll thoroughfares like I25 and I70 and other popular stretches of highway.

Yesterday, the majority party started the day by saying that these expansive new tolling provisions would come out of the bill, then later that morning most in the majority party unsuccessfully voted to keep new tolling measures in the bill, only to reverse themselves again by dinner time, voting on a party line basis to reinsert provisions calling for new tolling across Colorado. I'm convinced that if we stuck around until dessert we might have spared the citizens of this state the "TOLL HERE, TOLL NOW" requirements in the FASTER bill. Unfortunately, we didn't.

Now let's be clear: We aren't against tolling. We are simply against tolling asphalt that the taxpayers have already paid for. And that's what FASTER proposes – double dipping taxpayers on the most widely used roads in Colorado. Explain that one to the folks back home.

The FASTER proposal goes on to propose a range of new commission's and enterprises and authorities – as if we don't have enough new commissions in Colorado since the dawning of the Colorado Promise, and as if more commissions will improve the economy or fix unsafe bridges.

We think the current Transportation Commission is doing a new job. They don't need a new bureaucracy peeking over their shoulder. In any event, we should endeavor to push every dollar we can towards fixing our roads and bridges, not paying for meetings among people who talk about fixing roads and bridges.

Finally, this bill does not reallocate any money – not one penny – within our existing budget to roads and bridges.

Not a dollar of General Fund, this year or next or the next.

Not an additional dollar of severance tax – today or tomorrow or ever.

Under this bill, motorists pay a lot more, but government carries on just the same -- business as usual -- blithely refusing to reprioritize any money at all toward the basic function of fixing broken bridges.

If you wonder why Republicans will be voting NO, this glaring, irresponsible pothole in FASTER is a good reason why.

When you add it up, the FASTER plan does indeed successfully extract a lot more money from families and businesses, but it is emphatically not good public policy. Huge fees in a period of economic decline, tolling popular roads that have already been paid for, a crazy-quilt of new bureaucracies: yes, this bill generates a lot more money for roads, but it is not sensible, it is not thoughtful, it is not the right direction for Colorado.