





least 2039, when its share of debt is expected to be paid off, Gonzalez said.

Unless a decision is made otherwise, the Transportation Department will continue to work on designing, building and installing new all-electronic toll gantries along the full length of the Mass. Pike, Gonzalez said, despite the potential that some of them may no longer be needed just a few months before they are scheduled to go into operation.

"We wanted more certainty, but we don't have it right now," she said Wednesday. "We're going to move forward until and if a decision is made otherwise."

Funding for the project will be provided by the Transportation Department through toll collections, Gonzalez said. The state began soliciting bids this month for designing and building the project, with the work scheduled to start next June.

The high-tech system for collecting tolls involves devices positioned above the highway's travel lanes that would read a vehicle's E-ZPass transponder, or scan its registration plate and bill the vehicle's owner by mail. Cash and ticket transactions will be eliminated from I-90 under the plan, following several months of testing the electronic-only collection system.

Mass. Pike tolls were part of a recent stalemate on Beacon Hill over transportation funding. Governor Patrick had shot down a \$800 million transportation finance bill, saying it failed to address the uncertain future of tolls, but the Legislature overrode the governor's veto late last month.

If the status quo holds, the decision on the future of the tolls west of Route 128 would be left up to whoever holds the position of secretary of transportation at the time the debt is settled, Gonzalez said.

The secretary could decide that part of the Mass. Pike is not in a "state of good repair," and opt to keep collecting tolls in order to generate revenue to improve and maintain the highway, she said, or decide it is in good enough shape that the tolls are no longer needed.

Gonzalez said officials expect it will take until 2039 to pay off the debt — part of which stems from the Big Dig's extension of I-90 to Logan Airport — tied to the portion of the Mass. Pike east of Route 128, meaning toll collection will continue there until at least then.

The transportation finance bill included a measure allowing the Transportation Department to collect tolls at the Mass. Pike's six westernmost interchanges — between West Stockbridge and Chicopee — for the first

time since they were eliminated in 1996. The department recently announced its decision to resume collecting those tolls starting in mid-October.

The decision to switch to all-electronic, open-road toll collection was made with the goal to reduce traffic congestion and increase safety, in addition to reducing long- and short-term operating costs, according to planning documents.

Currently, toll plazas require drivers with transponders to slow down while traveling through an E-ZPass lane, and others to come to a stop while paying the toll.

"I think it's a good idea that we're using technology in this way that will hopefully cut down costs and make traveling on the turnpike more efficient. I think it's important that we do that," said state Representative Tom Sannicandro, a Democrat who represents Ashland and part of Framingham.

But, he added, "this is unfair to the MetroWest commuters in that we're the only ones paying to get into the city of Boston, and I think we need to look at taking down these tolls."

The new system would feature "toll zones," which would consist of laser scanners, cameras and other electronic equipment affixed to a steel gantry above the roadway.

Cars and trucks passing underneath would pay the toll either via an E-ZPass account or by a new program, called Pay-By-Plate, that would generate a monthly bill based on scans of the vehicle's registration plate as it entered and left the highway.

Bills through the Pay-By-Plate program would include an additional charge, likely \$1 to \$2, in order to cover the cost to process and mail the invoices, said Gonzalez.

State officials said that currently about 70 percent of tolls on the Mass. Pike west of I-95 are paid through E-ZPass, and about 80 percent of the tolls on the portion between Weston and Boston are paid by E-ZPass.

There are 24 toll plazas at Mass. Pike interchanges and highway tunnels. The new system would require 17 gantries to do the same job, planning documents say.

One other gantry is to be installed to replace the toll booths on the Tobin Bridge. The new technology there is scheduled to be up and running by early next year, and will serve as a pilot for the all-electronic system that will eventually be installed on the turnpike, Gonzalez said.

Before cash and ticket systems are shut down on the turnpike, the state will spend several months testing the new technology, according to a recently compiled, 55-page report on the project.

State officials said that if they are not replaced, the existing plazas would require more than \$65 million in



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