

## Our Changing Economy

# User Fee Might Cut Huge Highway Need

By Philip Stoddard Brown

**"EITHER** we spend \$1.8 billion for highway construction in the Washington area over the next 20 years, or we waste more and more time in travel and incur greater operating costs as traffic increases; if we don't spend at least \$1.8 billion for highways, the cost of travel will be greater." This assertion has been made repeatedly, and effectively, during the recent months of controversy over the report on the Mass Transportation Survey.

But, it ain't necessarily so.

If motorists were to bear the entire cost of the new highways, there might be a lot less commuting in private cars than the engineers predict. A little arithmetic will indicate, I think, that many people would move closer to their work, or use public transport.



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As much as \$1 billion, apart from Federal and State funds, may be needed to complete the recommended program, according to a report prepared by the Institute of Public Administration. If this sum were raised by an added gasoline tax—or by some system of tolls—the cost of commuting to work in central Washington from Silver Spring, Bethesda, Fairfax, Alexandria, or parts of Arlington would be increased by \$4 or \$5 a month.

### Subsidized Suburbanites

This plus the added cost of off-street parking for many motorists would bring the cost of driving to and from work, in a single-occupant car, to \$40 or \$50—in some cases more, depending upon the exact distance of travel and expense of parking. Surely this is enough to cause many people to join auto pools, use public transport, or move closer to their place of work.

At present, the government subsidizes apartment dwellers in Maryland and Virginia and thereby encourages movement to the suburbs. The cost of the great network of streets, highways and bridges that already exists is not borne entirely by motorists. Many families save rent by living in an apartment in Silver Spring or Fairfax County, instead of one nearer their place of work, and this saving is not wholly offset by the greater cost of travel.

If the subsidy were withdrawn, there would be, I predict, a great demand for downtown apartments. The vast now-vacant area in the Southwest and the northern fringe of the central business district from 16th Street to Union Station would be redeveloped with elevator apartments enclosing and adjoining park and play areas. This would make for a "healthy" central city.

The use of highway facilities can be regulated by (a) congestion, (b) some form of edict, or (c) the technique of pricing. Pricing is the often-criticized, but effective, technique in a private economy of avoiding anarchy, on the one hand, and regimentation, on the other. Why should it not be used to regulate the use of private cars?

### Need Depends on Finance

Why encourage people to live farther and farther away from their places of work and then limit the volume of traffic by the resulting congestion? Why make the man who walks or takes a bus to work help pay for expressways?

Traffic projections are based on the assumption that the future cost of travel, relative to income, will be the same as in 1948-55. But this will be true only if motorists are spared a direct assessment for a major portion of the huge outlays that are recommended.

If the demand for water, gas, electricity and telephone service were measured by what would be used if the cost of these goods and services were financed out of real estate, income or sales tax revenues, the amounts needed would be much greater than they are under a system of user charges.

The "need" for new highways depends, I think, on how they are financed. If I am wrong—if it turns out that gasoline at 40c a gallon and parking fees (set without subsidy) don't cause any substantial number of people to use public transport or to move closer to work—one course is to build a multitude of expressways, overpasses and underpasses, sparing a tree here and there, or even a park area where possible.

One way to estimate "need" is to put the highway construction program on a self-financing basis immediately and to build, as soon as possible, one comfortable, highly efficient rapid-express line.

### Let's List Outlays

Let's test this "need" for a \$1.8 billion 20-year highway program that is 17 times more costly than what has been spent in the past 20 years in the Washington area. (Actually, the engineers recommend building three-fourths of this 20-year program in the next 6 years.)

Let's reserve the general tax revenues for urgent social needs that can't be financed by user fees. And let's, by the way, have a listing for the whole metropolitan area of the capital outlays "needed" for schools, health clinics, public buildings, urban rehabilitation, Potomac River improvements, reservoirs, filtration plants and playgrounds over the 10 or 20 years.

It is wrong, I think, to oppose any program by the mere declaration that it's too costly, or that there isn't enough money. There's enough money for any project that has a high enough priority. The problem is one of establishing priorities. This is difficult where public services are involved because the pricing technique is not very helpful.