

Virginia charging commuters up to \$40 a trip for use of interstate highway

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On Monday December 4, the state of Virginia introduced toll lanes on a major interstate highway connecting the northern Virginia suburbs to Washington, D.C. Before launch, tolls for a one-way trip on a 10-mile stretch of Interstate 66 were projected as high as \$40, up to \$4.00 a mile.

Motorists travelling in the High-Occupancy Toll lanes by themselves, without a passenger, pay the tolls going eastbound (into Washington) from 5:30 to 9:30 a.m. and from 3 to 7 p.m. westbound, Monday through Friday. There is no toll for cars with two or more occupants.

The tolls fluctuate in price based on traffic on the highway, based on a requirement of maintaining a minimum average speed of 45 mph. As traffic increases, the toll rises to limit the vehicles entering the roadway, with the tolls adjusting every six minutes.

There is no upper limit on the tolls. During the first week, the top rate was \$14.50, although it was estimated to go as high as \$40 as traffic volume increases. In effect, those for whom such a price is not an obstacle—the upper-middle-class and the wealthy—will zoom along at high speed, while those who cannot afford such a toll will be confined to lanes where there is no guaranteed minimum speed and traffic will be a bumper-to-bumper crawl at rush hour.

As one commuter aptly remarked on Twitter: “The tolls on I-66 are being increased so only the 1% can afford to use it. Time to get that private jet.”

Virginia government officials tried to sell the price-gouge as a way to help the state better manage traffic, encourage carpooling and public transit use, and give commuters “more options.” They also claim that toll revenue will be used for transit improvements in northern Virginia, including new commuter bus routes and park-and-ride facilities.

Rather than increasing taxes on corporations and the wealthy to expand affordable and convenient transit options, however, the new tolls serve merely to ration access to high-speed road travel for the vast majority of working people who must drive to work. Commuting times in the Washington, D.C. region consistently rank among the highest in the country.

Prior to introduction of the tolls, Interstate 66 from the Washington beltway to the D.C. border was restricted to cars with two or more occupants (“High-Occupancy Vehicle” or H.O.V.) during rush hour. While vehicles with two or more occupants can continue to use the highway for free, with the introduction of the toll lanes, the rush hour periods were extended 90 minutes. Thus, many solo drivers who previously could use the interstate by leaving before 6 a.m. or after 9 a.m., are now forced to pay the exorbitant tolls.

For those living further away from D.C., and who cannot afford the new tolls, alternative transit options will only increase their already-long commutes, and are also not cheap. For those driving from the outer suburbs and parking at the furthest west Metro train stations, parking and a round-trip fare into Washington runs at least \$16 a day.

Metro, the Washington area’s bus and subway system, is constantly under-funded. This summer, Metro cut bus routes, reduced funding for door-to-door transportation for the disabled, increased fares on both rail and buses, and reduced the number of trains on five of the six rail lines.

The I-66 toll lanes add to an already large network of such roads in northern Virginia. In the past five years, about 45 miles of tolled “express lanes” have opened on I-95 and on the Capital Beltway (I-495). By 2022, Virginia projects to have 90 miles of toll roads in

northern Virginia, including a planned expansion of the I-66 toll road on a 22.5-mile stretch running outside the Beltway.

Maryland is also planning to introduce tolled express lanes on about 100 miles of highway, including on the entire 40-mile portion of the Beltway running through the state, as well as on a 30-mile stretch of Interstate 270, and on the Baltimore-Washington Parkway.

The proposal for the new express lanes on I-270 and the Baltimore-Washington Parkway calls for them to be financed, designed, built, operated and maintained by private companies. According to Maryland's governor, if completed, the projects would represent the largest privatized highways in North America.

According to the *Washington Post*, toll roads in the U.S. currently generate \$13.8 billion in annual revenue. In essence, this is a regressive tax that falls disproportionately on the working class, as workers pay a far higher portion of their income in commuting costs.

And the toll roads being introduced and expanded in the Washington region are just the beginning. Rob Puentes, president of the Eno Center for Transportation, and proponent of the increased use of toll roads, told the *Post* that the Washington, D.C. region "is emerging as a pioneer and innovator when it comes to using congestion pricing ... It's going to have implications far beyond just this region."

Libertarians are also gushing at Maryland's scheme for increased tolled highways. Robert Poole, director of transportation policy at the Reason Foundation, a libertarian think-tank, told the *Baltimore Sun* that Maryland's toll road plan "is a very big deal. The tolling community, the [public-private partnership] community, the express-lane community, will be going gaga."

While the ruling class enthuses over the opportunity to extend the sway of the capitalist market over commuter travel and squeeze money out of the working class, the traveling public will be increasingly forced into a series of bad alternatives. With public transportation funding dwindling, and no expansion of high quality options, workers face the choice of longer and more expensive drives, or inadequate mass transit options that are consistently starved of funding.

Northern Virginia is also home to numerous military contractors including Lockheed Martin, Northrup

Grumman, General Dynamics, and Raytheon, which receive tens of billions in federal money to produce the weapons used in US wars. While no expense is spared to arm the Pentagon, working class commuters in the region face increasingly expensive costs of living and travel.



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