

A tax for every mile you drive? Toll booths on I-77?

That, along with toll roads on Interstates 95 and 77, are among proposals considered.

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Imagine your car's odometer as a taxicab meter.

A special transportation committee on Wednesday approved a package of money raising proposals, including a tax on N.C. vehicle owners based on the number of miles their vehicle travels each year.

The 21st Century Transportation Committee also recommended that state lawmakers consider putting toll booths on Interstates 95 and 77.

The panel, made up of lawmakers and nonlegislators, will hold a final vote on the recommendations on Dec. 10 before sending them to the legislature as a menu of possibilities.

The vehicle miles tax would be collected during the car's annual inspection and could replace or supplement the current gas tax. The gas tax has produced less money than in the past because of better fuel efficiency, a cap on the tax and, more recently, declining gas prices.

Lawmakers on the committee, however, immediately low-balled the chances that the legislature would embrace many of the recommendations.

"Probably many of them won't be viable this session because of the economy," said Sen. Richard Stevens, a Raleigh Republican.

The committee is charged with finding new ways to pay for the state's growing road and transit needs as the population mushrooms and current revenue sources flat line or drop. North Carolina maintains more miles of roads than any state except Texas, because the Tar Heel state does not require counties to pay for roadwork. And N.C. cities now are reaching the size at which officials are building or contemplating light-rail systems.

The vehicle miles tax likely would promote the most contentious debate, as it would charge car and truck owners based on their odometer readings at annual inspections.

"It's going to take a real learning curve for the general public," said Rep. Becky Carney, a Charlotte Democrat, "and the General Assembly."

Committee leaders offered an example of a quarter-cent or half-cent per mile tax. That would cost a car owner \$25 or \$50, respectively, for 10,000 miles of travel. Drivers on average put about 12,000 miles on a car per year, according to federal data.

Other proposals included raising the highway use tax charged on car sales and increasing registration fees, tolls and bonds.

Carney cautioned that if toll roads are approved, they should be considered for all interstate highways.