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Light stays green for possible tolls on I-70 near tunnel

By John Ingold
The Denver Post

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A ski-rack-topped car cruises through the Eisenhower tunnel on I-70. Drivers could pay \$5 under the proposal. (AP Photo/David Zalubowski)

A controversial plan to put tolls on Interstate 70 near the Eisenhower Tunnel won again Friday, this time passing out of the state Senate Appropriations Committee.

The plan, Senate Bill 213 from Senate Minority

Leader Andy McElhany, R-Colorado Springs, would allow the state to charge up to \$5 tolls on the highway in order to pay for projects to expand the interstate's capacity.

It passed 7-3 Friday morning, surprisingly receiving support from all but one Democrat on the committee — and, even more surprisingly, two no votes from committee Republicans.

"It continues to stay alive," McElhany said after the hearing. "We take one step at a time. We've still got a long way to go through the process."

The bill was weakened, though, in its trek forward. McElhany and the committee amended the bill in two places to take out mandates that the state move forward with tolling. The bill now says the state can implement tolls on the highway if it chooses.

McElhany's bill, along with another, now-defeated I-70 tolling bill, have been roundly criticized by mountain lawmakers and community leaders for ignoring the existing study groups coming up with ways to solve congestion problems on I-70.

Last month, Sen. Dan Gibbs, D-Silverthorne, led a rally at the state Capitol of mountain residents against the ideas, even though McElhany's plan would exempt residents in Clear Creek, Gilpin and Summit counties from the tolls. Numerous witnesses testified at the bill's first hearing that it would hurt businesses and tourism in the mountains.

But Friday's opposition came from two metro- area Republican senators, Mike Kopp of Littleton and Ted Harvey of Highlands Ranch. Kopp said he is against the idea because he believes citizens have already paid for those roads.

Instead, Kopp said, any tolls placed on interstates should be placed on new lanes and used to pay off

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the cost of those lanes. It's a subtle distinction. As opposed to tolling, then building new lanes, Kopp would rather build, then toll.

"I'd rather bond against future revenue," Kopp said.

The other senator to vote against the plan was Moe Keller, D-Wheat Ridge.

Five Democrats voted for the plan, including Sen. Abel Tapia, D-Pueblo, who said he voted for it because it would still allow the I-70 study groups to make recommendations on how to fix the highway.

The bill now goes to the full Senate.

A proposed ballot measure that would have enshrined a permanent funding source for transportation projects in the state constitution died Friday in the Appropriations Committee.

*The Associated Press contributed to this report.
John Ingold: 303-954-1068 or
jingold@denverpost.com*

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