

Senate Transportation Committee

Vivian Hall 271-3091

SB 627-FN, relative to toll rate adjustments, E-Z Pass customer discounts, and the acquisition and improvement of portions of Interstate Route 93 to support the New Hampshire turnpike system and the 2027-2036 ten year transportation plan.

Hearing Date: January 20, 2026

Time Opened: 1:04 p.m.

Time Closed: 2:06 p.m.

Members of the Committee Present: Senators Ricciardi, McConkey, Ward, Prentiss and Fenton

Members of the Committee Absent : None

Bill Analysis: This bill:

I. Provides for toll rate adjustments at specified turnpike plazas to support projects in the 2027–2036 ten year transportation plan.

II. Establishes a frequent customer discount for New Hampshire E-Z Pass users.

III. Authorizes the conveyance of a portion of Interstate Route 93 in the city of Concord to the bureau of turnpikes to accommodate improvements to the I-93 Bow-Concord corridor.

Sponsors:

Sen. Watters

Sen. Fenton

Sen. Reardon

Who supports the bill: Senator David Watters, Senate District 4, Amy Charbonneau, Continental Paving; Ryan Audley, RS Audley Inc.; Bob Sculley, New Hampshire Motor Transport Association; Jim Jalbert, C&J Bus Lines; and Alex Koutroubas, Associated General Contractors of New Hampshire.

Who opposes the bill: Curtis Howland; Timothy Finney; and Daniel Richardson.

Who is neutral on the bill: Jen Czysz, Executive Director, Strafford Regional Planning Commission; Mark Davie, Strafford Regional Planning Commission; and David Rodriguez, Assistant Commissioner and Chief Engineer, New Hampshire Department of Transportation.

Summary of testimony presented in support:

Senator David Watters, Senate District 4

- Senator Watters introduced Senate Bill 627-FN with a replace-all amendment, aimed at increasing revenue for New Hampshire's turnpike system.
- The bill raises tolls only for out-of-state drivers, cash users, and non-New Hampshire E-Z Pass holders, while holding New Hampshire E-Z Pass users harmless (about 85% of New Hampshire drivers).
- New revenue would support the 2027–2036 10-year transportation plan, including major safety and infrastructure projects and maintenance costs across the turnpike system.
- Senator Watters said the measure is necessary due to declining transportation revenues, rising construction costs, and the end of elevated federal funding.
- The bill repeals the old E-Z Pass discount structure to allow a more generous discount for NH E-Z Pass holders while increasing other toll rates.
- It also includes an inflation-indexing provision and shifts authority to the legislature to approve toll increases, which he believes aligns with its responsibility to fund the 10-year highway plan.

Senator McConkey asked for clarification in the replace-all amendment.

Senator Watters clarified that in section 1 and section 2 of the amendment in who sets the toll rates.

Senator McConkey asked who decides which projects are funded, and for clarification on in-state transponder rates versus out-of-state toll increases.

Senator Watters said this bill could generate \$60 million a year. There are many projects that could potentially move forward.

Senator McConkey asked if this bill were to be passed, would there be funds that would be freed up in these ten years.

Senator McConkey asked for more clarification over where this is supposed to happen. He raised concern over not a single planning commission project can move forward. He would like some funds allocated to the North Country.

Senator Watters said the Committee could work on the allocation in funding for projects. He mentioned that if we pass this that another vehicle would be to add it to the ten-year plan.

Senator Ricciardi expressed concern about the current lack of funding for projects and asked whether this could serve as a tool to assist constituents affected by noise in building necessary noise barriers. Senator Watters confirmed that it could.

Senator Ricciardi asked whether the authority to raise tolls again in four years would rest with the Department of Transportation, the legislature, or the Executive Council.

Senator Watters clarified that the Department of Transportation would adjust tolls based on inflation every two years, providing a long-term solution while still letting the legislature decide whether to maintain or change New Hampshire toll rates in the future.

Senator Ricciardi raised concerns over giving the DOT the authority to raise the tolls.

Amy Charbonneau, Continental Paving

- Ms. Charbonneau expressed concern about the funding shortfall and believes New Hampshire is at a breaking point.
- Without the toll increase, the state may spend \$70–90 million on temporary fixes for projects, which doesn't align with the long-term master plan.
- Ms. Charbonneau stated that investing in projects like in Bow, Concord and other turnpike improvements stimulates housing, jobs, and local economic growth.
- She noted that from the other hearings she has attended, most residents at hearings were not opposed to toll increases and supported projects, such as bridge repairs and infrastructure improvements.

Senator Ricciardi noted that the department struggles with lack of funding to maintain and keep the roads safe.

Ryan Audley, RS Audley, Inc.

- Mr. Audley echoed the concerns from previous testimony about the lack of funds to complete necessary projects.
- He noted that projects have been underfunded for a decade and the funding shortfall has not been addressed for nearly 20 years.
- Funding from the bill would support local suppliers, manufacturers, and construction workers.
- Mr. Audley highlighted that the two-year highway plan is legally constrained, but projects like the Exit 6/7 interchange were added without adequate funding, meaning either the project will be removed or other projects might be cut.

Senator Prentiss noted that since 2009, there have been projects on the 10-year plan that remain unfunded and stalled, creating the potential for unsafe roads in her district.

Senator McConkey thanked Mr. Audley and Ms. Charbonneau for being substantial employers.

Bob Sculley, New Hampshire Motor Transport Association

- Mr. Sculley commented on the automatic increases in the bill language and would oppose that part.
- Mr. Sculley had questions about the funding mechanisms proposed and who would have the authority to determine the allocation of funding.

Alex Koutroubas, Associated General Contractors of New Hampshire

- Mr. Koutroubas highlighted the need for toll adjustments.
- The Gasset Plan is no longer a realistic planning document.
- He hopes that the legislative body can come up with a realistic ten-year plan.
- Mr. Koutroubas said it has been 19 years since there was a toll rate increase.
- He said he is paying 5 cents less for tolls than his grandfather was paying in the 1980's.

Jim Jalbert, C&J Bus Lines

- Mr. Jalbert expressed the need for funding, especially since Covid funds have dried up.
- He questioned the policy of no sales or income taxes and asserted that this has contributed to the revenue shortfall.
- He explained that private contractors pay plow drivers significantly more than the state—around \$50 an hour for experienced operators and over \$33 an hour with benefits—while the department is capped at about \$26 an hour.
- Mr. Jalbert asserted that state wages aren't competitive, the department is struggling to hire and retain workers, resulting in roughly 25% of positions remaining vacant.
- He emphasized the need for more infrastructure in the interest of safety.

Neutral Information Presented:

Jen Czysz, Executive Director, Strafford Regional Planning Commission

- Director Czysz highlighted the \$400 million shortfall in the current 10-year plan.
- Some projects are being removed or deferred because of the funding shortfall.
- Director Czysz shared the Commissioners wanted to express the importance of finding and increasing revenue sources.

David Rodriguez, Assistant Commissioner and Chief Engineer, New Hampshire Department of Transportation

- Mr. Rodriguez explained that increases only apply to vehicles without a New Hampshire Easy Pass account; New Hampshire EZ Pass users would keep current discounts.
- Toll rates are reviewed every two years against inflation. Increases happen in \$0.25 increments, likely 4 or more years before affecting New Hampshire EZ Pass users.
- New Hampshire tolls remain lowest among EZ Pass agencies, with a 30% discount for passenger vehicles and 10% for trucks.
- Toll revenue funds operations first and capital projects last.

Senator Ricciardi noted that when this program was initially introduced, there was a special discount to encourage sign-ups and asked if the DOT considered offering something similar now to get more New Hampshire drivers to enroll at a discounted rate.

Mr. Rodriguez said that is something the Department of Transportation could do.

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Date Hearing Report completed: January 23, 2026