

Response from Jackie Baillie MSP

Scottish Executive Tolled bridges review – phase two consultation

Submission by

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Introductory comments

This submission will refer to the Erskine Bridge, the Clyde crossing between West Dunbartonshire and Renfrewshire.

Unlike Scotland's other toll bridges crossing the Forth and the Tay, the Erskine Bridge is wholly owned by the Scottish Executive. This gives Ministers much more flexibility in terms of determining the operating regime for the Erskine Bridge.

This submission supports the widely held view within the Clyde Valley Structure Plan group which includes Renfrewshire, West Dunbartonshire, Glasgow and Argyll & Bute and Inverclyde that the tolls on the Erskine Bridge should be abolished. Indeed, West Dunbartonshire Council found in a survey that 98% of respondents in that Council area backed scrapping the tolls on the Erskine Bridge.¹

There are several financial, legal, economic, environmental and social reasons why we believe that the tolls should be abolished. However, we believe that first and foremost there are transport considerations – congestion elsewhere, under-utilisation of the bridge's capacity and the opportunities that exist for a more balanced system of crossing points across the Clyde.

Accordingly, this submission will confine its comments to those issues related specifically to the Erskine Bridge. It will not comment on technical issues such as exemptions – which are only relevant if tolls were to continue on the bridges.

1. Legal

The power to levy tolls was established under the Erskine Bridge Tolls Act 1968, and associated Statutory Instruments.

The Act provides that tolls can be levied, but only for specified purposes. These purposes are such that the tolls “may be sufficient, to defray the costs of the construction, improvement, maintenance and repair of the bridge, and

¹ West Dunbartonshire Council News, August 2004, p4

to make provision for the cost of its administration and for its continued operation after the end of the toll period.” (Scottish Executive Development Department: Erskine Bridge Accounts 1999-2000.)

It is clear that tolling was originally only intended to last for 20 years. However the powers to levy tolls were extended by Scottish Office Ministers via Orders in 1991 and 1996 and again via the Erskine Bridge Tolls Act 2001. We believe this was difficult to justify and we can see no justification now for the continued retention of the tolls.

The powers enabling toll charging on the Bridge are due to expire on 1 July 2006. Following this review our view is that a timetable should be set for the removal of the tolls prior to 1 July 2006.

2. Financial

At the time of the most recent renewal of the powers in 2001, the most recent figures indicated that £72.0 million had been collected in tolls.² Given the cost of constructing the Bridge was £10.7 million and the cost of maintaining it from the time it opened until 2002-03 was £22.3 million³, there is an accumulated surplus of £34 million. It is clear that the cost of bridge construction has been paid several times over.⁴

3. Economic

It is understood that 1,200 people commute to work from West Dunbartonshire every day and 1,000 journey from Renfrewshire to West Dunbartonshire. Each commuter pays about £300 a year to cross the Bridge. Tolls are also a real disincentive for both smaller and larger business which might pay additional costs that vary between £3,000 and £70,000 per annum to operate and generate employment in West Dunbartonshire and Renfrewshire. These are areas which have amongst the highest levels of unemployment and the lowest levels of business activity in Scotland. Council estimates have calculated that 100 extra jobs could be created in West Dunbartonshire alone if the tolls were abolished.⁵

Companies are less willing to locate in West Dunbartonshire than elsewhere because they may consider that it will be more difficult to draw on a broad pool of labour, given that prospective employees would have to pay extra travelling costs to and from work. Removal of the toll would help mobility of labour and broaden the opportunities for the relatively high proportion of unemployed people living in West Dunbartonshire. West Dunbartonshire is recognised as having high levels of deprivation and the cost barrier presented by the tolls on the Erskine Bridge makes an already disadvantaged area less competitive.

² Scottish Parliament Information Centre research paper 01/13 The Erskine Bridge Tolls Bill

³ Answer to questions S2W-3970 and S2W-3967 both answered by Nicol Stephen on 19 November 2003

⁴ Answer to question S2W-3966 answered by Nicol Stephen on 19 November 2003

⁵ West Dunbartonshire Council News, August 2004, p4.

The Scottish Executive has previously acknowledged that the Erskine Bridge plays a key role in the economic regeneration of West Dunbartonshire.⁶ It is certain that the bridge plays a similarly important economic role in Renfrewshire. Removal of the tolls will provide an additional impetus to boost both areas, extending the areas that our constituents would be able to travel to work.

The cost of congestion on the Kingston Bridge the economy is approximately £19 million, as shown in the comparison of crossings in section 7 below.⁷

4. Environmental

By discouraging the full utilisation of the Erskine Bridge through the toll regime, traffic is displaced to the Kingston Bridge and Clyde Tunnel and into residential areas on both the north and south of the river. Accordingly, it increases direct exposure of the public to vehicle emissions and high speed traffic with the attendant risks of accidents.

Phase One of this review noted “Whilst there are no specific air quality problems in the area around the Erskine Bridge itself, Glasgow City Council has declared an Air Quality Management Area (AQMA) in the city centre due to transport related air pollutants. Glasgow City Council is currently consulting on a draft Air Quality Action Plan which sets out a programme of work to reduce pollutant concentration within the AQMA. Any shifting of traffic away from the Erskine Bridge towards the city centre could exacerbate an existing air quality problem in that area. In other words: any increase in tolls could discourage some current Erskine Bridge users in favour of the Clyde Tunnel or the Kingston Bridge with unwelcome congestion and air quality consequences for the city centre.”⁸

Concentrations of nitrogen oxide (NO₂) in the Glasgow city centre have been assessed as being well above acceptable levels. Congestion on the Kingston Bridge and car exhaust emissions are significant contributory factors. The Council has estimated that 66% of NO₂ emissions in the city centre are due to road traffic emissions, with the M8 being the largest single source.

Accordingly, Glasgow City Council established an Air Quality Management Area for the city centre with the objective of improving NO₂ levels. It is clear that the removal of Erskine Bridge tolls will lead to better utilisation of the bridge and bring consequent environmental improvements to the Glasgow city centre and the areas around the approaches to the Clyde Tunnel through reduced noxious emissions.

5. Social

⁶ Scottish Executive press release “Future management of toll bridges” 15/04/2005

⁷ Scottish trunk roads 2003.

⁸ Tolloed bridges review – phase two consultation, Scottish Executive, 2004, paragraph 6.1.2

Tolls on the Erskine Bridge have led to a situation where there are almost no public transport links between the north and south bank of the Clyde. Abolition of the tolls will encourage more widespread usage of the bridge and provide the potential for better public transport links between the north-western and southern parts of the greater Strathclyde region. The lack of public transport has been highlighted as a particular issue in terms of access to Glasgow airport and to specialist acute care facilities on both sides of the river.

6. Congestion alleviation

One of the key objectives of this second phase of the review is to consider how the Erskine Bridge might help in meeting the challenge of reducing congestion at the Clyde Tunnel and the Kingston Bridge in the centre of Glasgow.

On 12 February 2004 during Question Time the Deputy Minister for Finance and Public Services was asked whether he would ask his officials to investigate the effect that removal of the tolls would have on congestion at the Clyde tunnel and the Kingston Bridge. The Minister replied that he was happy to bring the matter to the attention of his officials and of the Minister for Transport. Whilst we have not seen the results of this work undertaken by the Executive, we feel sure that it would support our view that congestion at the Clyde Tunnel and Kingston Bridge would be reduced if the Erskine Bridge were to be toll-free.⁹

The Clyde Tunnel and Kingston Bridge are the major congestion pinch points into the city centre of Glasgow. Removing the tolls from the Erskine bridge would present a third option to people who have to cross the river and make better use of the underused capacity on Erskine Bridge.

The Kingston Bridge is the busiest section of road in Europe, with some 170,000 cars daily using its ten lanes and suffers from the highest level of congestion in Scotland. Before the Erskine Bridge was built, the A739, including the Clyde Tunnel was the main route from the South West of Scotland to North Scotland.

Unlike the Erskine Bridge, the Forth and Tay bridges have an entirely different pattern of usage. Increased traffic on the Forth Bridge, for example, will worsen congestion into Edinburgh, whereas increased usage of the Erskine Bridge will alleviate congestion into Glasgow. The Scottish Executive has allocated significant capital resources to dealing with congestion on the approaches to the Forth Bridge, in particular the improvements to the A8000. Removing the tolls on the Erskine Bridge in our view is a particularly cost effective way of reducing congestion elsewhere, especially in a context where there are few alternative methods of managing traffic flows away from the Clyde Tunnel and the Kingston Bridge. Even when the new stretch of the M74

⁹ Question S20-1283 answered by Tavish Scott on 12 February 2004 in the Chamber.

is built, the Erskine Bridge will play an important role given the volume of traffic that will continue to rely on the three existing crossing points

7. Comparison between crossings

The table below compares the degree of congestion on each of the three crossing points across the Clyde and the economic cost of that congestion.¹⁰

Crossing	No. crossings	Annual cost due to congestion
Erskine Bridge	Almost 9.7 million vehicles crossed the Erskine Bridge in 2003 (about 26,500 per day), more than any previous year (in 2004)	£435,000 (in 2003)
M8 Kingston Bridge	About 56.5 million vehicles annually or about 155,000 per day (in 2000)	£19.4 million (in 2003)
A739 Clyde Tunnel	About 21.2 million vehicles annually or about 58,000 per day (in 2004)	Figures currently unavailable

8. Other related works

The A82 and A814 approach roads to the bridge currently suffer from toll booth-related delays. Speeding up flows on these routes will bring significant benefits. But load factors on key junctions and stretches of road need to be taken into account if the tolls are removed and measures taken to ensure that congestion is not displaced onto roads that connect with the Erskine Bridge.

On the south side of the bridge, vehicles can access the M8 via a short connecting stretch of motorway (M876). But on the north side modification of the Drumry roundabout and options for traffic management at Kilbowie roundabout need to be considered if increased utilisation of the Erskine Bridge is not to adversely affect journey times from West Dunbartonshire towards the Glasgow city centre.

¹⁰ Scottish Transport Statistics 2004; Scottish Transport Statistics 2000; Congestion on Scottish trunk roads 2003; Glasgow City Council Land Services; Congestion on Scottish trunk roads 2003

West Dunbartonshire and Glasgow City Councils have recently agreed to make the Yoker relief road a priority. Construction of the Yoker relief road would open up more of the riverside area and, combined with removal of tolls on the Erskine Bridge, would make travel through western Strathclyde significantly easier ensuring more efficient utilisation of the Bridge itself.

9. De-trunking of the Erskine Bridge

In response to the specific question in the consultation document regarding whether the Erskine Bridge should be de-trunked we can see no advantage in this proposition. Indeed there are several disadvantages including the need to establish a joint arrangements mechanism between the two councils which would be onerous. We believe that there are good reasons for the Erskine Bridge remaining as a trunk road.

Conclusion

In summary, the Erskine Bridge faces different challenges to those at the Forth and Tay Bridges and accordingly should be treated differently.

The economic and environmental arguments above clearly demonstrate net benefits to those who use the Erskine Bridge, and the geographic area stretching from West Renfrewshire to West Dunbartonshire to Glasgow.

Motorists have paid for the cost of the Erskine Bridge several times over and it is clearly time for the tolls to go.