

TAKING CHARGE: A TWO-TIERED LEADERSHIP PLAN

A universal interoperability system needs to be rolled out in a controlled, meaningful way by experts who know how to do it effectively and efficiently. It is in the toll industry's best interest to claim that role. HNTB recommends the following two-tiered approach designed to generate short-term, grassroots successes and educate legislators about national interoperability:

- 1. Gather some early, "easy" wins.** Even if it means using existing technology, the industry needs to demonstrate that, unprompted by government, toll agencies can work together to hammer out interoperability agreements.
- 2. Establish an overarching structure for national toll interoperability.** Now is the time to encourage lawmakers drafting the next transportation reauthorization bill to be mindful of the implications of forcing national interoperability versus allowing it to evolve in a manner consistent with each agency's business practices. ■

the unsustainable gas tax, one option gaining prominence is a user fee or tax based on vehicle miles traveled.

The intention of a VMT program would be to tax total miles driven, regardless of where. Most agree the tax would be collected by converting our nation's roadways into a vast network of interoperable toll roads. If the states involved in the ATI initiative can connect the dots and establish interoperability, they could lay the groundwork for a universal VMT charging program.

Eden, Ely and LeFrois say if the toll industry does not take a proactive role in developing interoperability, the federal government may dictate how toll agencies operate, with no knowledge or concern for the costs or long-term implications to toll businesses.

"In business, you have three choices," Eden said. "Lead, follow or get out of the way. We—the toll operators—need to lead on this issue."

"Frankly, if we don't solve interoperability, some sort of standard or protocol may be forced on us. It's far better for the industry to find the solution ourselves," Ely said.

Toll agencies that oppose a VMT system say agencies risk being absorbed into a large, national system and stripped of any toll collection capabilities of their own. Not so, says LeFrois.

"Leading the national interoperability charge gives the toll industry an opportunity to write its own ticket to future viability," he said.

By leveraging their collective experience to shape federal policy, toll agencies could play a lead role in collecting VMT fees, create a new revenue stream in the process and ensure their coexistence in a new world of revenue collection.

"Legislators will need technical and operational know-how to bring a national VMT program online," LeFrois said. "Who better to show them how to cross state lines and agency boundaries than the toll industry?"

By spearheading the transition, toll agencies can provide a higher level of customer service, perhaps avoid a complete system overhaul and develop the interoperable protocol the industry lacks. That way, if Congress does flip the switch on VMT, the toll industry will be ready to respond.

"Our customers are starting to demand more," Eden said. "We, as an industry, have to find a way to collect tolls seamlessly across state, local and agency jurisdictions. If we cannot deliver this to our customers, an enterprising industry or the government will." ■

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