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Tollways lease may boost tolls

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GLEN ELLYN — Chicago area drivers could see large toll increases if state officials approve handing over the state's toll highway system for a big bundle of cash, according to a state-authorized financial analysis.

The 134-page report comes as lawmakers consider whether the state should sell or lease the tollway to a private company and reap billions of dollars for other state needs. A panel of lawmakers are to discuss the analysis from financial adviser Credit Suisse during a Tuesday meeting at the College of DuPage in Glen Ellyn.

The report obtained by an Arlington Heights newspaper, includes a variety of scenarios for rate increases.

In one, I-Pass users would see tolls increase from 40 cents to 64 cents on average in four years and cash payers' tolls would go from 80 cents to \$1.27 during that time.

But that would assume a 75-year lease with a 50 percent toll increase every 20 years and a 3 percent increase in all other years — netting the state between \$16.7 billion and \$23.8 billion.

More conservative estimates would give the state between \$10 billion and \$15 billion from a 75-year lease with 3 percent annual toll increases, and less than \$2 billion from a 75-year lease with 3 percent yearly toll increases allowed only after 2030.

A state lawmaker studying the idea says the report has persuaded him to oppose an outright toll highway sale because the state would be giving up the tollway's enormous value and because of lacking state oversight of private tollway owners.

"We need to structure an agreement with any private sector partners that guarantees a gold standard of accountability and transparency," Sen. Jeff Schoenberg, D-Evanston, said Monday. "Once you've sold, it's gone."

But Schoenberg said the report also highlights the financial value of tollway headquarters and other properties and raises the possibility of creating an endowment to cushion against toll increases. A lease agreement where the state hands over operations to a private company still is an appealing idea, he said.