

ALBANY – Five Hudson River bridges and the Walkway Over the Hudson would soon get a new owner if Gov. Andrew Cuomo has his way.

Cuomo on Tuesday proposed abolishing the state Bridge Authority, which for decades has owned and maintained the Rip Van Winkle, Kingston-Rhinecliff, Mid-Hudson, Bear Mountain and Newburgh-Beacon bridges.

The proposal, included as part of Cuomo's \$178 billion budget plan, would see the Thruway Authority — already owner of the Gov. Mario M. Cuomo Bridge in the lower Hudson Valley — take ownership of the spans and the popular Walkway pedestrian bridge in Poughkeepsie.

The idea, which Cuomo has toyed with in some form since at least 2012, would be to consolidate operation of the state's toll bridges north of New York City.

In theory, that could lead to opportunities to cut costs, particularly as the authorities forge ahead with cashless-tolling projects that collectively cost hundreds of millions of dollars.

But the idea of scrapping the Bridge Authority has raised concern in the past from local and state lawmakers, who fear it could lead to higher tolls on the Hudson River crossings.

Freeman Klopott, a spokesman for Cuomo's budget division, said the merger "simply makes sense."

"Both authorities have overlapping roles and combining them will create the opportunity for efficiencies and an alignment of resources particularly as they both establish cashless tolling," he said.

Currently, the non-commercial toll on the Bridge Authority's five vehicular bridges is \$1.50 cash roundtrip, with the authority pushing to gradually raise it to \$2.15 over the next three years. E-ZPass users pay \$1.25, which would increase to \$1.65 in the authority's latest proposal.

The Cuomo Bridge toll is currently \$4.75 for E-ZPass users, with the Thruway hoping to raise it to \$5.75 by 2022; Cash users would pay 30% more.

Assemblyman Kevin Cahill, D-Kingston, said he doesn't support abolishing the Bridge Authority until the state conducts a study of its potential impact.

He sponsors a bill that would require such a study.

"I think that what we need to do is to determine the specifics," Cahill said Wednesday. "Until we have the specifics are at hand, which can only be done after a study, we shouldn't be making any steps that could conceivably be to the detriment of the mid-Hudson Valley."

The Bridge Authority was first established in the 1930s under then-Gov. Franklin D. Roosevelt, who helped create the quasi-public entity so it could issue bonds to build the Rip Van Winkle Bridge during the Great Depression.

Along with the vehicular bridges, the authority owns and maintains the Walkway Over the Hudson, though it's run on a day-to-day basis by the state Department of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation.

The authority collects more than \$60 million in toll revenue each year, which is used to maintain the bridges and pay staff.

The Thruway Authority, meanwhile, collects more than \$700 million in toll revenue annually on New York's 570-mile superhighway, one of the longest tolled road systems in the country.

That includes revenue from the Cuomo Bridge, which the current governor pushed to name after his father after opening the \$4 billion span in 2018.

Cuomo's budget doesn't bank on any immediate cost savings from having the Thruway Authority absorb the Bridge Authority. But the governor's office maintains it would make the system more efficient going forward by having one authority do the job, rather than two.

Chris Steber, a spokesman for the Bridge Authority, said the authority looks forward to "working closely with the Thruway Authority and the Governor's office on this proposal" so it can "continue to effectively serve the transportation needs of the people of the Hudson Valley and the state of New York."

Richard Gerentine, a former Ulster County legislator who is chairman of the Bridge Authority's board, said he first learned Tuesday that Cuomo was going ahead with his merger proposal.

He voiced concern over Cuomo's plan, echoing Cahill's call for a study of the potential merger's impact before going ahead with anything.

"If he wants to do a study, I would be all in favor of doing a study to see what the pros and cons are of gathering together both agencies," Gerentine said. "I think the New York State Bridge Authority has done a tremendous job over the years under the different executive directors, their staff and their employees."

Cuomo's office has clashed with the Bridge Authority in recent months over the planned toll hike on the authority's bridges.

In December, state Budget Director Robert Mujica sent a letter to authority leaders criticizing an early proposal to boost the cash toll to \$2.50, arguing that an increase of "that magnitude" was "not warranted" and accusing them of using financing assumptions that weren't industry standard.

Later that month, the Bridge Authority's board proposed a smaller toll increase, first to \$1.75, then to \$2 in May 2022 and \$2.15 in May 2023.

A public hearing on the proposed toll hike will be held March 9 at the Poughkeepsie Grand Hotel.

If approved by lawmakers as part of the state budget for the fiscal year that starts April 1, Cuomo's plan would see the Bridge Authority's board abolished.

Instead, the Thruway Authority's board — which currently has seven members — would add an eighth, who must be from the Hudson Valley area currently served by the Bridge Authority.

HIGHLAND - Can they do it?

Can the Hudson Valley's state legislators thwart Gov. Andrew Cuomo's plan to merge the New York State Bridge Authority into the Thruway Authority?

Legislators speaking at a media conference in Highland Thursday and in separate interviews voiced optimism that they will prevail – but did not minimize the effort it will take.

Toward that end, they encouraged their constituents as well as local business, government and community leaders to make their sentiments heard on the subject.

“Call your legislator, call the governor, come to Albany and lobby door to door,” said Assemblyman Jonathan Jacobson, D-Newburgh. “Contact everybody.”

“We really need people to speak up,” added Sen. Sue Serino, D-Hyde Park, whose Facebook page is already full of comments from people worried about the prospect of higher tolls.

Cuomo put the plan in his 2020-21 budget, the contents of which he and the leaders of the state Assembly and Senate will ultimately negotiate. The deadline for adopting the budget is April 1.

Before then, legislators said they are working to keep the plan out of the one-house budgets the Assembly and the Senate will pass in the coming weeks in preparation for final budget negotiations.

Already, Dutchess County Executive Marc Molinaro and Dutchess County Legislature Chair Gregg Pulver have announced their opposition. The Dutchess County Regional Chamber of Commerce passed a resolution of opposition Wednesday.

The chairmen of the Ulster County and Orange County legislatures, David Donaldson and Stephen Brescia, respectively, have signaled their opposition and intent to pass resolutions. Their county executives, Pat Ryan and Steve Neuhaus, however, have been mum.

“It will be on our agenda in March,” said Greene County Administrator Shaun Groden. “We can't afford higher tolls on the Rip Van Winkle Bridge, not when our community college and our hospital are in Columbia County and 40 percent of the people who work there live here.”

The Columbia County Board of Supervisors was scheduled to adopt a two-page resolution Thursday that extolled the Bridge Authority's record of high maintenance and low tolls as “ensuring the seamless flow of commerce, commuting, family connections and access to the many...recreational and cultural resources of the mid-Hudson Valley.”

HIGHLAND – A bipartisan contingent of state legislators predicted Thursday that the Hudson Valley's economy and quality of life will deteriorate if Gov. Andrew Cuomo prevails in his effort to abolish the New York State Bridge Authority.

Shivering in 20-degree temperatures and struggling to be heard over traffic, legislators stood outside the Bridge Authority's headquarters adjacent to the Mid-Hudson Bridge's toll plaza to detail why they believe Cuomo's plan is, in the words of Assemblywoman Sandy Galef, D-Ossining, “crazy, crazy ...”

Assemblyman Jonathan Jacobson, D-Newburgh, who organized the event, said the governor's plan to merge the Bridge Authority into the Thruway Authority was "a solution in search of a problem" that defied common sense.

Cuomo has used the mantle of efficiency to justify the merger, but lawmakers scoffed at the idea that the operations of the 88-year-old Bridge Authority, widely regarded as a poster child for efficiency, could be significantly improved upon.

Galef said she believes Cuomo's motivation is to boost the Thruway Authority's balance sheet as it continues to grapple with paying for the new \$3.9 billion Tappan Zee Bridge.

"They see them (the Bridge Authority's five crossings) as cash cows," Jacobson said.

Without exception, lawmakers who have spoken out against the merger say they envision a steady increase in Bridge Authority tolls to fund Thruway Authority projects elsewhere in the state – starting with the new TZB.

The loss of such nominal tolls, they argue, would turn bridges that now function as local roads into barriers and give people on either side of the river pause about using them as often as they do for business and pleasure.

Sen. Sue Serino, R-Hyde Park, also raised the specter of local interests getting lost at the Thruway Authority in much the same way they have been lost at the Metropolitan Transportation Authority where four Hudson River counties share one vote.

"Our voices are muted," she said.

Richard Gerentine, the Bridge Authority's chairman, and three of the board's four other commissioners, pointed out that they already work with the Thruway Authority and other state agencies to get the lowest prices on everything from vehicles to road salt.

"Nobody ever told us to do that," said Gerentine, "and we don't need a merger to keep on doing that."

He and the others gave a shout-out to a clutch of Bridge Authority employees in attendance for keeping the condition ratings of the five Hudson River crossings at the highest possible level.

"We've never, never, had a red flag (a finding of a deficiency in an independent inspection)," said Gerentine.

Others at the event included representatives of Assemblyman Kevin Cahill, D-Kingston, and U.S. Rep. Sean Patrick Maloney, D-Cold Spring, the Dutchess County Regional Chamber of Commerce, Town of Lloyd and Civil Service Employees Union.