

NO TOLLS

National Alliance Against Tolls

Dear Sir,

Clifton Suspension Bridge Toll Increase - Objection

The National Alliance Against Tolls (NAAT) was formed by groups protesting against existing tolls in England, Scotland and Wales. We are also opposed to toll increases and tolls by other names such as "congestion charges" and "road pricing".

The Trust that runs the Clifton Suspension bridge has applied to increase the toll for motor vehicles from 30 pence to 50 pence.

The notice of the toll increase gave no reason for it. But the Trust said a year ago that:-

"The toll increase has been prompted by a huge rise in overheads resulting from:

***The vaults:** ... Now additional funds are needed to monitor and maintain this hitherto unknown aspect of the historic structure.*

***Insurance:** A huge increase in the cost of insuring the bridge means that the premium doubled last year and further increases are predicted.*

***The illuminations:** A six-figure sum must be found if the new lights are to be in place for Bristol's celebration in 2006 of the bi-centenary of Brunel's birth....*

These new costs come in the wake of a big drop in the investment income ...

"The bridge is run by a charitable trust. We receive no outside help towards our costs, either from central or local government, or from lottery funds.

Therefore the bridge has to be paid for through tolls alone."

At 50 pence, the world-famous Clifton Suspension Bridge will still be charging one of the lowest tolls in the country, compared with other bridges on major routes..."

We object to the proposed increase in tolls, in summary our reasons for the objection are:-

1. The Government collects far more from roads users than is spent on roads. There is no justification for tolls on any roads, and certainly not on what the Trust admit is a major route. The process of collecting tolls will tend to exacerbate any congestion problems on the bridge and its approaches.

2. The Trust says that it receives no outside help. We believe that it should. The road as previously indicated should be financed from the taxes collected from roads users. Non road aspects of the bridge, should be financed from general taxes via the Government or local authorities or from private or quasi private sources such as the National Lottery. Though we suspect that there is a Catch 22, in that some of these sources may not agree to granting funds if the Trust has a captive cash source in the form of motorists who are forced to pay tolls.

3. The Trust is not collecting the 5 pence toll from pedestrians etc, which would increase its income. Not that we believe pedestrians should be charged. But neither do we believe there is any justification in charging other roads users.

4. A large part of the Trust expenditure appears to relate to activities which are not essential for a highway. In particular it seems that a large amount of money is spent on the visitor centre, and the Trust give one reason for the increase as "illuminations". The cost of collecting the tolls is also an unnecessary cost. A cost that would not exist if the trustees asked for the bridge to be taken over by the authorities.

5. The Trust cite a larger increase in insurance as a reason for the increase. It is not revealed how significant it is. But if it were significant, then the question should be raised as to what is the point of the insurance. If there was a an unfortunate major calamity, then outside assistance should be available.

6. The Trust in their last accounts submitted to the Charity Commission indicate that they have reserves of £6,173,000. This was an increase over the previous year's reserves of £5,539,000. As the turnover of the bridge is around £1 million a year, this is a very substantial reserve. There is no need for a reserve of this size. It appears that some of the risks are covered by insurance, and as with the point that we made on that, if some major need arose for spending to maintain the bridge as a highway, there are other sources of funds that the Trust could apply to.

7. The Trust says that it is "a body governed by public law", but it is not clear (apart from the two local authority representatives) who they represent or who appoints them. In looking at whether to make an objection, we emailed the Trust asking could we see a copy of their latest accounts - we got no reply. We have seen a copy of their 2003 accounts on the Charity Commission web site. But that site also says that their 2004 accounts are overdue. As the Trust are applying for a toll increase, this is unfortunate.