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New Jersey Turnpike Accepts Toll-Collector Concessions to Avoid Firings

By Terrence Dopp - Apr 29, 2011 10:30 PM GMT+0300

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New Jersey's toll-road agency approved contract concessions from unions representing fare collectors to avert Governor [Chris Christie's](#) proposal to turn over the jobs to a private company.

The [New Jersey Turnpike](#) Authority's board voted today to accept the offer, which includes a 24 percent wage cut over two years and the elimination of all fee takers by July 2013 as the agency moves toward full electronic collection. The deal, which needs union members' approval, affects about 800 workers.

"It's going to be tough and very difficult, but this buys us two more years," Fran Ehret, president of the International Federation of Professional & Technical Engineers [Local 194](#), which represents collectors, said after the vote. "There's been a lot of stress and a lot of worrying about what's going to happen to these families if those jobs were lost."

Christie, a first-term Republican, has said turning over toll collections to a private firm on the 148-mile (238-kilometer) [New Jersey Turnpike](#) and 173-mile [Garden State Parkway](#) would save the state as much as \$43 million a year. The roads generated a combined \$952 million in toll revenue in 2009.

[New Jersey](#) received four bids from private firms seeking to replace toll collectors, who cost the state an average of \$100,000 a year in salary and benefits, Transportation Commissioner James Simpson told lawmakers earlier this month.

Saving Jobs

Unions representing toll collectors sued to block the plan, and offered concessions to save the jobs. Ehret said her union agreed to nearly all stipulations sought by the authority.

Under the agreement, collectors' top salaries would drop to \$57,000 after June 30 from \$65,000, and to \$49,500 the following year, according to an agency memo. The deal also would lower the number of sick days workers get to 12 a year from 15 and prevent those who quit from collecting unused sick-day payouts.

Workers would also forgo a so-called separation bonus of \$500 for each year of service paid to employees with more than 10 years at the authority. Ehret said she expects as many as 100 retirements as workers seek to collect the bonuses and payouts before the agreement takes effect July 1.

The deal will save the state \$35 million over two years, Simpson said. The agency expects to have fully automated toll collection in place on the parkway within the two years and on the

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turnpike within five, he said.

Full-time workers will vote on the agreement tomorrow, and part-timers on May 2, Ehret said. Unions must approve the deal by May 3 or the jobs may still be turned over to an outside firm, said Simpson, who is also chairman of the agency's board.

"This is unprecedented in this state," he said following the unanimous vote in Woodbridge. "These concessions were significant and they brought it in line with privatization."

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