

BBC News - Why would anyone buy naming rights to a highway?

By Daniel Nasaw BBC News Magazine, Washington

27 March 2012 Last updated at 19:38 ET

By Daniel Nasaw BBC News Magazine, Washington

The Beltway circular, part of which passes through Virginia, is often jammed



The US state of Virginia is poised to become the first to sell naming rights to its bridges, highways and roads. But given how long drivers can spend in gridlock, is there a risk in putting your firm's name to this public space?

Arsenal fans travel to Emirates Stadium in London to see their football team, while Leicester City supporters crowd into King Power Stadium, which is named after the duty-free shopping company but used to be known as Walkers Stadium after the brand of crisps.

Naming sports facilities after corporate brands is even more pervasive in the US, where the New York Giants and Jets football teams play at MetLife Stadium and the Chicago White Sox baseball team plays at US Cellular Field.

By 2013, drivers in the US state of Virginia, America's 12th most populous state, could be treated to traffic reports warning of lengthy delays on the Pepsi highway or the Coca-Cola bridge.

In an effort to raise money for its cash-strapped road network, the state has passed a law authorising it to sell to private companies the rights to name its roads, highways and

People love sport but hate commuting



bridges.

It is unclear whether wealthy individuals could name bridges for themselves (or their mothers or spouses). The law allows "private entities" to buy the rights, but a spokeswoman said the state department of transportation had yet to develop guidelines.

Officials have yet to determine how much they will charge for a stretch of congested highway near Washington DC or for a scenic rural byway near Roanoke.

But they say the scheme is a creative funding alternative to raising taxes.

"We're in a tight budget and have limited resources, and this is just one way for us to help offset the cost of transportation infrastructure," says Virginia Transportation Secretary Sean Connaughton.

"What we're basically trying to do is get the most value out of taxpayers' investment to help avoid tax increases."

States and cities across the country are likely to watch carefully, say transportation analysts, because many of them are also short on cash.

US roads and highways need about \$166bn (£104bn) a year to keep them in shape, but states and the federal government are spending only about \$78bn, according to the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials.

"With the revenue available to states right now, we can't maintain the system that's been built over the last 100 years," says John Horsley, the group's executive director.

"Unless we get more revenue, our highways and bridges will begin to go downhill and the people who depend on them will not be happy."

Both proponents and critics of the road-naming rights plan describe it as merely the next step in the ever-growing commercialisation of American public space.

"This is the next frontier for brands and companies to reach consumers in a way which traditionally they couldn't, because cities and states didn't want to commercialise their properties, their marketing assets," says Jeff Marks, managing director of Premier Partnerships, which specialises in naming rights and sponsorships in sport.

But the scheme amounts essentially to auctioning public spaces to the highest bidder, says Elizabeth Ben-Ishai of Public Citizen, a consumer advocacy group.

"It's evidence of a decline in our values when we start naming public spaces and public entities after corporations instead of national heroes or historical figures," she says.

"The state acting as a marketer, working on behalf of these corporate interests, is a distasteful trend. It undermines the value of public space."

Corporate branding and naming rights consultants believe the move could give brands an opportunity to cut through the ever more cluttered US advertising and media environment.

"You're stuck

on a highway, you're sitting, and all you can do is look at the sign that says 'Tostitos Bridge' or 'The Coca-Cola overpass'," says Denise Yohn, a San Diego brand-building consultant.

This could be yours for \$200,000 a year



"I see this as a move that companies would consider just as something different - a new touch point, a new vehicle from which to broadcast their name. Repeated exposure is so important for brands these days because there is so much clutter."

Marketing consultant Roger Dooley says a company could sponsor the faster carpool lanes common in many metropolitan areas: "You'd have this very positive association: 'Man I'd rather be in the Pepsi express lane than in the plain old highway.'"

Denise Yohn Brand-building expert



I always bring up how Zappos advertises at the bottom of the trays at the Transportation Security Administration screening points.

There cannot be a more hellish place than an airport screening check point.

It puts [the brand] in a place where no one is doing anything other than staring at your bin.

It doesn't communicate much of a message, it doesn't make a huge impact, but it's exposure.

Companies could append their brand names onto pieces of infrastructure and project a community-service image, rather than as if they are claiming a trophy or lining the pockets of a wealthy team owner, say branding experts.

"If you're Verizon, if you're American Express or Coca-Cola, and you've got a very large marketing or advertising budget, does it send a better message that you're going to potentially sponsor someone who's already a billionaire, or can you give the same amount of money to a city or a municipality and create a community goodwill programme?" proposes Mr Marks.

But marketing consultants and transportation analysts do acknowledge the risk of brand damage inherent in an association with a miserable commute.

"The Dan Ryan Expressway [in Chicago] is one of the world's worst roads," says Dan Neil, a motoring columnist for the Wall Street Journal.

Irritated motorists stuck in traffic would have nothing to do but look at brand names



"It does not make me think any kind thoughts about [deceased Chicago politician] Dan Ryan and it probably isn't good for his posterity."

Companies could mitigate that risk by choosing carefully which stretches of road to name, and by delicately composing the signage, says Mr Dooley, who has written about the connection between neuroscience and marketing.

"If it's a section of road that is normally in good condition and isn't full of big delays, then maybe there's not that much of a danger of negative association," says Mr Dooley.

"If I were a brand I would try to craft a message: 'This highway is supported by Pepsi' or something like that. Put yourself on the motorist's side, rather than 'We're responsible for this mess that you're stuck in.'"

Whether or not it keeps companies' brands on motorists' minds, the naming rights scheme is unlikely to have a significant fiscal impact, considering the dire state of Virginia's infrastructure needs.

Virginia transportation officials expect it will raise about \$109m - a pittance compared to the state's total \$3.2bn highway budget.

And it was widely panned by the state's leading newspapers: The Roanoke Times called the ploy an embarrassment, and the Virginian-Pilot wondered whether any companies would subscribe.

"Most roads, bridges and tunnels, especially in [the region of] Hampton Roads, are in such disrepair that no self-respecting business would willingly pay to attach its name," its editors wrote.