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Advancing Mobility Worldwide

Q&A with Javier Rodriguez, IBTTA's 2015 President

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By Kate Holder

Javier Rodriguez talks with TRN about his 2015 goals as IBTTA President and his thoughts on various industry issues.

WHO: Javier Rodriguez, PE, is the International Bridge, Tunnel and Turnpike Association (IBTTA) president for 2015. [IBTTA](#) describes itself as "the worldwide association for the owners and operators of toll facilities and the businesses that serve them." The organization, founded in 1932, has members in more than 20 countries. Mr. Rodriguez has been Executive Director of the [Miami-Dade Expressway Authority \(MDX\)](#) since March 2007.

WHEN & WHERE: January 6, 2015, by telephone

SUBJECT: Rodriguez's goals as IBTTA president this year and his thoughts on the infrastructure funding debate, toll interoperability and toll roads in Florida.

Interview by Kate Holder, TRN Contributing Editor

TollRoadsNews (TRN): What are your goals as President of IBTTA this year?

Javier Rodriguez (JR): The first thing I had to do when I was selected to be IBTTA President was to come up with a theme for my year, and the theme I chose was "The Business of Mobility." I'd like to focus on what

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is it that we provide, how we provide it, and why it's so important to our states, our nation, and our communities.

As far as specific goals, the first thing is to elevate the conversation regarding transportation and infrastructure investment. Everyone knows we need a long-term funding solution in the United States. I also want to continue fostering a good environment to ensure that nationwide interoperability occurs.

We initiated a campaign under (former IBTTA President) Rob Horr, which was "[Moving America Forward.](#)" I want to continue the excellent work we're doing there as well as to ensure that we meet the needs of our members in Europe, Asia, Latin America and elsewhere.

Finally, I couldn't be the IBTTA President without ensuring that our association is financially sound and we're welcoming new members. Those are my goals for this year.

TRN: Let's turn to the May 2015 expiration of the current extension of the federal transportation funding bill. Would you talk about the specific steps that IBTTA will take in the debate leading up to reauthorization?

JR: Absolutely. We're going to continue the same efforts we've had for the last couple of years. We're going to continue our advocacy, and meeting with Obama Administration officials at USDOT, with U.S. House and Senate members, specifically with those who are on the House Transportation & Infrastructure (T&I) Committee and on the Senate Committee on Environment & Public Works (EPW). We'll make sure that many of our members and board members get the opportunity to share their experience, not just with their own Member of Congress, because experiences here in Florida may be relevant to issues in certain parts of Texas or in other states.

Tolling is important. It's not appropriate everywhere, but it's an option that should be considered. It's a viable and sustainable option, and something that IBTTA members will continue to discuss with and educate our elected officials on, at all levels.

Finally, the [IBTTA Washington Briefing](#) will take place **March 29-31 in Washington, DC**, when IBTTA's members will come together. They'll engage Congressional staff and Members of Congress on Capitol Hill to talk to them about transportation funding.

TRN: So as has happened before, it sounds like you plan to involve IBTTA members in direct lobbying efforts.

JR: Right.

TRN: Do you plan any joint action with other groups?

JR: Absolutely. Part of our strategic plan was to form partnerships with other associations, primarily AASHTO (American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials), as well as the Alliance for Tolling Interoperability, and the Intelligent Transportation Society of America (ITS America).

We'll advocate specifically on how tolling is a proven option, how tolling is applicable in certain areas, and has proven to be very worthwhile. Another focus that I'd like to see is how we can continue our partnership

with ITS America and intelligent transportation systems. I think that's a marriage made in heaven from my perspective -- toll roads and the advocacy of intelligent transportation systems.

TRN: Regarding reauthorization, what specifically would you like to see happen, and what do you think will happen?

JR: I've had meetings with the House T&I Committee Chairman, Congressman Bill Shuster (R-PA); the former Chairman of the T&I Subcommittee on Highways and Transit, Congressman Tom Petri (R-WI); and I've had meetings with a lot of the Congressional delegation members in Florida, who are very active in the transportation arena. I understand where they're coming from, that it's a complex issue, but it's one that we can't continue to kick down the road. So I would love to see a multiyear transportation bill, one that offers a variety of funding strategies including tolling, and here's the key for IBTTA -- we would like it to be as flexible as possible for the states to decide when and how to apply those implementation strategies or funding strategies.

We would like to see a bill that offers states the flexibility to consider tolling not only on the interstates but on other federal-aid roadways, and leave it up to the locals to decide if it's appropriate or not.

I'd like to see it passed in 2015, and if I really knew what was going to happen, I probably wouldn't be the Executive Director of MDX. I have no idea what will happen.

TRN: Let's turn to nationwide interoperability for a minute. What's the status of that, and what's your understanding of the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) definition of compliance?

JR: MAP-21 (the current federal transportation funding bill) basically said: it's up to you -- the industry -- to make nationwide interoperability happen by 2016.

IBTTA created four sub-committees to work on interoperability, and they've worked diligently to decide what the national protocol should be, what the business rules should be, and what the signage nationwide should be so that a customer or commuter knows that your interoperable tag is available. That work is well under way. I was always a believer that before you have nationwide interoperability, you're going to see regional interoperability. Speaking as a Floridian, Florida was always an interoperable state -- we have multiple agencies in Florida, we all use [SunPass](#) and we all signed interoperability agreements. The [E-ZPass Group](#) in the Northeast has also been an incredible example of regional interoperability.

I'm convinced that IBTTA this year will identify a national protocol. Then the issue is, how does it get implemented? To give you an example here in Miami, if MDX just put out a brand-new system, then we would probably want to wait until it's depreciated to the point where it has to be upgraded, before we change it out and put in a new system. It's a financial concern.

When we speak about compliance with FHWA, it really depends because it doesn't spell it out in MAP-21. At IBTTA, we see our task as having to find the national protocol, find the testing criteria to ensure that the interoperability actually works, and establish appropriate signage, so that agencies around the country can start implementing it.

TRN: What do you see as some of the main challenges in tolling this year? There have been plenty of

reports of toll fatigue in Texas, and there's always news about financial troubles whether it's with a tolling agency or a concession company declaring bankruptcy. How would you speak to the funding challenges in tolling?

JR: I would tell you, as I said at the beginning, that I believe the investments in transportation infrastructure are critical. The lack of a long-term federal bill has prompted many states to get creative, and Florida is no different.

I don't see the challenge as tolling fatigue, I think it may be P3 (public-private partnership) fatigue, and maybe we need to be more creative in that portion of it. I do believe that a long-term transportation bill solves a lot of this in the states. I would also say that if a long-term transportation bill was flexible and gave states the option to utilize different types of funding, that would be another solution.

TRN: Let's turn to Florida, please give us a brief overview of the Miami-Dade Expressway Authority and what you're working on.

JR: The [Miami-Dade Expressway Authority](#) is a relatively young agency created 17 years ago. The State of Florida basically gave us five highways that at the time were in desperate need of overhaul, and entrusted us to operate them, expand them and finance all of their improvements. There's a public purpose to MDX; there's no profit motive, no return on investment.

We have over 225 lane miles, but we're not a big system, we're only at about 32.5 center-line miles. However, we serve over one million daily trips and we're an extremely urban expressway system. Most of our highways are four to five lanes each direction.

I am very proud to say that the MDX board, over the years, implemented a strategy of closing our open-road tolling method using technology rather than building toll booths that later would be torn down. That put a big strain on MDX in the early years because we didn't have enough revenues, so we had to pace ourselves.

The last leg of our all-electronic tolling conversion just took place. This past November, we went live on the last two highways: the Dolphin Expressway (SR-836) and the Airport Expressway (SR-112).

TRN: What are your annual revenues?

JR: With the implementation in November, it exceeds \$180 million now.

TRN: There's one more thing I'm wondering if you would comment on. There was a September 2014 report by the Florida Center for Investigative Reporting, called "Florida's Toll Lane Boom." It included some allegations of lack of accountability to voters by the Florida Department of Transportation, and of cozy relationships between state officials and private toll operators in pushing through large toll-road projects. Would you care to comment?

JR: I'd rather not get into the particulars but I will say this: In Florida, which is now the nation's third most-populous state, there is absolutely nothing else that can be done on our highways especially in our urban areas. Florida started looking at managed lanes in 2007 as a viable congestion management tool for its urban areas.

MDX hasn't gotten there yet, but Florida's Turnpike and the Florida Department of Transportation has implemented managed lanes, and they're wildly successful, people are using it. If you're from South Florida, you know the I-95 Express Lanes have changed the way that people move in South Florida completely, it's united two counties.

I don't want to speak specifically to the report, because it has nothing to do with MDX and I really didn't get into it. But I will tell you that the outcome and the program for Florida and managed lanes has been very successful, and will be very successful because of where it's being applied.

Editor's Note: Questions and answers were edited for clarity and length.

Further Reading

- [Daily News Briefs for September 17](#)
 - [Daily News Briefs for October 1](#)
 - [E-ZPass and Florida working on toll interoperability - startup by end of year?](#)
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