Okay, I acknowledge upfront, some may consider it a bit presumptuous to play with the title of Ernest Hemingway’s masterpiece published 75 years ago. *For Whom the Bell Tolls* was an instant best-seller. Its exploration of the idealism, camaraderie and harsh realities that grow and splinter under the pressures of war and death made it an established classic of American literature.

But I couldn’t keep from fiddling a little with the title given the ongoing discussions in Virginia and elsewhere about tolling of roads, bridges or other structures. Reading some of the characterizations, one might conclude tolls aren’t a part of a policy discussion, but actually are a matter of life and death.

Fortunately there’s some new research just out, the result of collaboration between Changju Lee, a graduate research assistant in the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering, and Dr. John Miller, principal research scientist at the Virginia Center for Transportation Innovation and Research in Charlottesville. With the title, “Lessons Learned from the Rise, Fall, and Rise of Toll Roads in the United States and Virginia,” the paper from Lee and Miller traces our love-hate relationship with toll roads from the colonial and early federal periods right through today.

The researchers used some key factors to better understand the use and popularity of toll facilities, including the relative stability of user fee and general tax revenue streams (user fees could be more stable and support better maintenance) and how toll facility design and toll collection technologies influence both public use and acceptance. By focusing on Virginia, they also were able to chronicle more than 400 years of examples close to home. Here’s an excerpt.

“The first highway legislation in North America was passed in Virginia in 1632; it put church parishes in charge of road construction and maintenance. Additional legislation in 1657, 1661, and 1663 transferred this responsibility to the county courts, which in turn appointed an individual to oversee highway work. All males over the age of 16, whether free or slave, were required to work for a specific number of days per year; ....” That’s toil, not toll, and probably not the preferred policy option today.

Virginia, of course, used tolls to advance dozens of projects, including major design-bid-build projects through the 1900s, such as the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel, the Coleman Bridge, the Nice Memorial Bridge, the Hampton Roads Bridge-Tunnel, the Norfolk-Virginia Beach Expressway and the Richmond-Petersburg Turnpike. Most recently, public-private partnerships for I-495, I-95 and the Elizabeth River Tunnels project have incorporated tolls both to accelerate improvements and to help manage traffic demand. The Hampton Roads Transportation Planning Organization, for example, recently documented that total peak period delays through the Downtown and Midtown Tunnel traffic had decreased 53% since tolls were imposed. That means more reliable trips.

The authors credit several factors with driving renewed interest in toll facilities today, including budgetary pressures, opposition to tax increases and rapidly increasing urban congestion. And they suggest that more toll facilities will be an important part of the future if the quality of the user experience is higher on toll facilities, if there is greater value placed on life-cycle, not just construction costs, and if public and private entities better coordinate and increase public and economic benefits.

Tolls, clearly, are not a matter of life and death, but as the Lee-Miller paper illustrates, will always be a matter for discussion. And so to conclude by playing not only with Hemingway’s title, but also his
epigraphical reference to John Donne -- “the road tolls for thee” – should be seen as a way to add to the discussion, not classic American literature.

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