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State Comptroller Calls for Reform
By Karen DeWitt

ALBANY, NEW YORK (2007-11-29) The New York State Comptroller says he'll be finished with an audit of the State Thruway Authority's finances within a matter of weeks, and will have some recommendations to make regarding the proposed toll hike.

A toll hike of 20% over the next couple of years is on hold, as State Comptroller Tom DiNapoli scrutinizes the Thruway Authority's books. The Comptroller says he's urging his auditors to work quickly.

"This is a very hot issue of great concern, and we're giving it full attention," DiNapoli said.

Comptroller DiNapoli says he's also looking at the Thruway Authority's stewardship of the state's canal ways, which costs around \$100 million dollars a year. Some have argued that cutting that expense alone could prevent the toll hikes. DiNapoli would not say whether he thinks the Thruway Authority should stop overseeing the canals, but did say he's looking closely at what functions fit in with the Thruway Authority's core mission.

The Comptroller spoke at a forum at SUNY's Rockefeller Institute, where he also proposed a series of reforms for public authorities, saying elected officials need to have more control over them.

"Call them whatever you want, the shadow governments, the backdoor borrowing machines, the way authorities have operated has blurred accountability," he said.

DiNapoli cites the case of the recent Metropolitan Transportation Authority fare hike proposal, and now the Thruway Authority's plan to raise tolls, saying authorities "have been used to raise taxes". He

says the authorities are making decisions that will effect millions of New Yorkers, yet even those hooked in to the government culture, like those who attended his speech, would be hard pressed to name the members of those boards. He says the public authorities have become a "great avoidance tool".

DiNapoli recommends that the terms of authority board members, currently at six to nine years, be shortened to four years, so that Governors could make appointments more frequently and gain more control over the authorities. He thinks authorities should be forced to comply with state contracting laws, and audits.

Elizabeth Lynam, with the fiscal watchdog group Citizens Budget Commission, says she likes some of the Comptroller's ideas, but cautions that it might not be such a good idea for politicians too have too much control over Authorities. She says authorities were created initially to make some of the tough decisions needed to run a superhighway, or mass transportation system, out of the realm of politics. But Lynam agrees that the authorities need to be more transparent, so the public knows what they are up to.

DiNapoli, who was appointed to his office last February after the previous Comptroller resigned because of a scandal, has a number of other ideas that he says will make the state budget more accessible to average people. He says he wants to "democratize" the budget, by writing it in plain English.

DiNapoli also plans to publish on the Comptroller's web site an annual state expenditure report, which will detail how much state officials are spending on traveling, how much it costs to heat state buildings, pay government workers, and fuel state vehicles, and other information.