

Khimki Toll Road to Open in 2014

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Some observers have claimed that a plan to widen Leningradskoye Shosse, pictured above, would breach a governmental commitment not to support roads that compete with a toll road from Moscow to St. Petersburg that is currently being built. **Sergei Nikolayev**

The controversial Moscow to St. Petersburg toll road will open to traffic in 2014 "regardless" of developments on parallel Leningradskoye Shosse, senior managers said.

Pierre-Yves Estrade, general manager of North West Concession Company, or NWCC, which will hold the rights to charge fees on the road after it is completed, dismissed concerns that plans to widen Leningradskoye Shosse would have an adverse impact on the project.

"This [toll road] service will help to attract new customers our way regardless of the alternative routes," he told journalists Monday, Interfax reported.

Estrade was responding to claims that a plan to upgrade Leningradskoye Shosse — the heavily congested artery that currently provides the main link between Moscow and St. Petersburg — would breach a contractual commitment made by the government not

to support competing roads.

Acting Khimki Mayor Oleg Shakhov said last week that authorities are planning to spend 6 billion rubles (\$189 million) to widen Leningradskoye Shosse.

Yevgenia Chirikova, the anti-road campaigner who is now running for mayor of Khimki, last week claimed a securities prospectus published by the company showed that the government is legally bound to compensate NWCC if it widens Leningradskoye Shosse to ease congestion because it would provide direct competition to the new road.

Chirikova said the clause, which effectively means the government is obliged to ensure sufficient traffic jams on Leningradskoye Shosse to force drivers on to the toll road, could be grounds for suing NWCC in French courts, but she has not said whether she will initiate such a suit.

NWCC, a subsidiary of a joint venture between French engineering firm Vinci and several Russian investors including Arkady Rotenberg, won the concession to build and levy fees on a 43-kilometer section of the new road in 2009.

Estrada dismissed the allegations as "rumors" and declined to comment on them.

The stretch from the Businovskaya junction with the Moscow Ring Road to Solnechnogorsk is currently "35 percent" complete, and will open for traffic in 2014, Estrada said Monday.

It will have 10 lanes between Moscow and Sheremetyevo Airport, eight lanes from Sheremetyevo to Zelenograd, and four between Zelenograd and the intersection with the M10 highway.

The road is just one section of a planned 650-hundred kilometer highway between the two capitals that on paper is meant to be completed by 2017.

The project has been mired in controversy since environmental activists challenged the route of the road through woodland near Khimki, on Moscow's northwestern edge.

Public protests in 2010 compelled then-President Dmitry Medvedev to halt work and order an inquiry into the route. The commission eventually endorsed the original route, but activists led by Chirikova have continued to oppose the plans.

Toll roads, in which concessionaires build roads in exchange for the right to levy a fee on drivers for several years, have come to be seen as an attractive model for attracting private investment to fund much needed but prohibitively expensive road links.

NWCC claims the total cost of the section of the Moscow to St. Petersburg road that it is building comes to more than 60 billion rubles, of which the state is providing just 22.9 billion.

In August last year an international consortium led by VTB Capital won a concession to build an 11.5-kilometer, 120-billion-ruble segment of a high-speed toll road in St. Petersburg.

The first toll road in the Moscow Region, a 23-kilometer stretch of the M4 Don highway that runs parallel to Kashirskoye Shosse to the south of the capital, was opened in May. Fees will

begin to be levied in the fall.

From Oct. 1, car drivers on the 48th to 71st kilometer of the highway, which connects Moscow to the Rostov region, will have to pay 10 rubles between midnight and 7 a.m., and 30 rubles between 7 a.m. and midnight.

Heavier vehicles like trucks and buses will have to pay 20 rubles between midnight and 7 a.m. and 60 rubles from 7 a.m. to midnight, while super-heavy vehicles will have to pay 40 at night and 120 rubles by day, respectively.

The charge is meant to recoup some of the costs of repairs to the highway, which took over three years and cost about 6 billion rubles.

Drivers will be able to pay in cash, by credit card or via specially-produced smart cards and transponders installed on the windshield of a car that allow drivers to pay automatically without stopping.

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