



Road tolls are inevitable for Toronto and Canada (op-ed by Andy Manahan)

Posted on February 7, 2017

When Premier Kathleen Wynne closed the door on Toronto Mayor John Tory's plan to toll the city's two main arteries to downtown – the Gardiner Expressway and the Don Valley Parkway — an opportunity was lost.

For now.

The truth is road tolls are inevitable for Toronto, as well as other major urban centres across Canada struggling with congestion. With Toronto and the surrounding region losing \$11 billion per year because of traffic congestion, according to the C.D. Howe Institute, we cannot afford to let it worsen.

The initiative was supported by Tory and a majority of councillors (32-9 vote), recognizing that Toronto's over-reliance on property taxes is insufficient to address all our future capital and operating needs.

While some people think of road tolls as a revenue tool, experience around the world shows that pricing road space has a positive role on managing traffic congestion. Just look at the areas north of Toronto where 407 ETR users have enjoyed virtually no excess congestion whatsoever during the last 20 years. More than 30 areas in the United States, including California, Oregon and Minnesota employ high occupancy toll (HOT) lanes to manage demand.

Road tolls tend to be controversial because there is a view that this is just another form of

unaffordable tax, and that governments should be able to manage their finances more responsibly. This misses the point that we cannot add tens of thousands of vehicles onto our road network every year without consequence. Road pricing will help to manage congestion in a way that is not possible through an additional fuel tax or sales tax, or a hike in property tax.

Are there other forms of road pricing which would change everyday commuting habits, such as encouraging carpooling?

Yes. Queen's Park is trying HOV/HOT lanes on the QEW, and there was strong public support (about two-thirds) in 2001 for HOV/HOT lanes on the DVP in a proposed road expansion.

Properly pricing roads is a way to manage demand for this resource more effectively. It sends a signal that other options should be considered such as carpooling, cycling or taking transit instead of driving as a single occupant in a car. New technologies mean that we don't have to use gantries and cameras, like on the 407. Instead, GPS or smartphone-enabled systems could be used to track users. Drivers would be charged based on time of day and/or distance travelled.

Many studies and polls have shown that support for road tolls and other revenue-generating measures rises when the money is dedicated to specific public works, such as improving road and transit networks. Let's have an informed discussion and ask people in this region specific questions about various options. Successful campaigns in the U.S. have demonstrated that the public gets behind tax increases when the revenues go toward transit projects and road improvements.

There is some relief for drivers and commuters: more transit is coming to the GTHA and that will impact traffic. Transportation Minister Steven Del Duca has said that many transit projects will be open by the time Toronto would have implemented the tolls in 2024. For starters, the Spadina Subway extension will be open in less than a year, the Eglinton Crosstown LRT by 2021 and GO trains will offer more frequent service along corridors.

While that will help, building a lot of transit is still no replacement for pricing roads based on time of day or congestion levels.

Properly implemented, road tolls target those who use the Gardiner and DVP, and help to mitigate ever-growing congestion on the two main thoroughfares into Toronto. And that will encourage commuters to find other ways to work and home.

This debate is not over.

Andy Manahan is executive director at the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario, and an organizer of "For Whom the Road Tolls," a panel discussion on Wednesday, Feb. 8 in Toronto presented by the Empire Club featuring Mississauga Mayor Bonnie Crombie and Toronto Councillor Josh Colle. ReNew Canada is the media partner for the presentation.