

# THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

## Toll roads only part of solution

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The ways in which we move ourselves from home to work are no longer working -- no pun intended.

Hundreds of thousands of commuting workers in the megalopolis from Whitby to Niagara Falls spend hours each day moving slowly (if at all) on highways that overwhelmed by sheer numbers.

Congestion is more than an inconvenience. Business and productivity suffer. Just as (or more) importantly, commuting time mortally damages the work-life balance that in the end is why we work at all. Vehicle exhaust -- exponentially increased by idling gridlocked traffic -- poisons the air, damages our lungs and causes other illness. Accidents, road rage, increased stress and its health effects are all corollaries.

We are a society that desperately needs better transportation for our citizens, but cannot agree on how to get it or pay for it.

We need to accelerate the public conversation about what we are willing to do to ease the congestion burden. A new study going this week to Transportation Minister Jim Bradley is sure to spark conversation -- some of it highly charged. Commissioned by an alliance of Ontario construction organizations, it's about how we could pay for the traffic and transit improvements we need.

The author, economics professor Harry Kitchen, doesn't dodge controversy. He recommends seven-cents-a-kilometre tolls on area 400-series highways, on the Queen Elizabeth Way, and on the Gardiner Expressway and the Lincoln Alexander and Red Hill Valley parkways. Kitchen also recommends new fuel and parking space taxes and vehicle registration fees to fund roads and transit and to discourage drivers.

Some of the recommendations -- notably on near-universal highway tolls -- will be rejected as politically suicidal. A recommendation to reform Metrolinx (the former Greater Toronto Transportation Authority) is just goofy. It would allow Metrolinx to levy taxes, decide its own spending and have its board directly appointed -- in essence creating a new and separate Transportation Government in Ontario.

The report also does not address the fundamental issue that if governments are going to discourage drivers with tolls, they must offer other, alternative ways for people to get to where they need to be.

But the general concept -- moving to user revenue to pay for roads and transit instead of relying on income and property taxes -- needs to be injected into the conversation. The executive director of the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario, which commissioned the study, acknowledges the report will meet opposition, but says, "the concept of user pay ... is fairer, more transparent and leads to greater accountability."

Some level of user pay or user subsidy for our transportation network is almost certainly inevitable. But how, how much, where and when all have to be discussed -- and if driving is going to become too expensive for most people, then alternatives have to be in place.

The present system is failing and is out of money. This report doesn't have the answers, but it does raise some very good questions.

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