

# THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

## Commute could take a steep toll; Road plan ideas include toll, taxes

Hamilton Spectator

Tue 17 Jun 2008

Page: A6

Section: Local

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Source: The Hamilton Spectator

Got an extra \$268 a month?

That's what it could cost Hamilton-to-Toronto commuters to take the highway to work if the province implements a road toll of 10 cents per kilometre.

The idea is one of many being batted around by Metrolinx, a provincial body developing a regional transportation plan.

Chair Rob Maclsaac said another \$3 billion to \$6 billion needs to be spent on transit and roads each year to ensure systems from Hamilton to just east of Oshawa can grow.

The cash would also help keep existing infrastructure in good repair.

"My view is that it's not a wise decision for us environmentally, economically (and) socially to simply say, 'We can't afford to do anything about this,' and to allow our transportation system to seize up," he said.

Metrolinx will hand a draft transportation plan to the province at the end of July. It will be accompanied by a draft investment strategy to suggest how to pay for the proposed changes.

Tolls, a gas tax and a parking tax are all being considered as ways to raise cash, Maclsaac said.

"To think that the government ... has between \$3 and \$6 billion a year that it's not currently using is not realistic," he said.

"We need to spend more money on transportation and we have to make some hard decisions on how it is that we are going to raise that money."

The final report is expected to be completed in the fall, after public consultations. The province will then decide whether to adopt the Metrolinx recommendations.

In January, the **Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario** released a report calling for tolls on major highways. A recent blue-ribbon panel on Toronto's finances also recommended tolling highways and expressways in and around the city.

Provincial Transportation Minister Jim Bradley has said the province has no intention of tolling existing 400-series highways. His office reiterated the sentiment yesterday.

Kevin Gaudet, Ontario director of the Canadian Taxpayers Federation, rejected the idea of a new gas tax, saying existing gas tax revenue is not used as it should be.

In its 2006-07 annual report, the federation said Ontario motorists shelled out \$4.1 billion in gas taxes, licensing fees and vehicle registration. Less than half of that -- \$1.9 billion -- was spent on fixing and constructing roads.

"It strikes me as wrong-headed to be asking for new taxes when they're not even using the current taxes they have in place for those things which they were designed in the first place," Gaudet said.

Shane Claidge, 32, takes the highway from St. Catharines to Hamilton every day for work.

He wasn't impressed with the idea of road tolls, suggesting money already collected in taxes should be used more efficiently.

But others say they wouldn't mind digging a little deeper for a toll.

Eric Lock, 49, routinely takes Highway 407 from Hamilton to Barrie and pays \$28 for a round trip. He says that road is always smooth and traffic-free.

"I don't mind (paying) if (it) goes to what they're supposed to do," he said.

Small change

Here are some ideas from Metrolinx about where to raise the extra billions and what it'll mean.

10 cents (or more) per kilometre: toll on all provincial and municipal expressways.

\$3,216: annual toll costs for a Hamilton-to-downtown-Toronto commuter.

7,000: number of daily commuters who drive from Hamilton to Toronto.

\$1: charge per weekday for every non-residential parking spot in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area. The cost would be levied as a tax on commercial property owners.

20 cents (or more) per litre: new gas tax.

\$76.90: cost to fill the tank of a 2009 Toyota Corolla with a 20-cent tax on top of today's average price.

\$150.72: cost to fill a 2009 Dodge Ram 1500 Regular Cab pickup truck with a 20-cent tax.

Today, the only tolls in Ontario are on the privately owned Highway 407. It's 18 to 19.75 cents per kilometre for cars and light vehicles.

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-- With files from The Toronto Star

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• Photo: Hamilton Spectator File Photo / Highway tolls -- one idea being pondered by the Metrolinx transportation body -- could make the drive to Toronto costly for Hamilton commuters.

Idnumber: 200806170019