



Reevely: Tolls are coming to Ontario's HOV lanes



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Vehicles crawl past the nearly empty Pan Am high-occupancy vehicle lanes during morning rush hour in Toronto in June. A report calls on the province to allow all drivers willing to pay a fee to use HOV lanes. Frank Gunn / THE CANADIAN PRESS

More tolls are coming to Ontario roads, Transportation Minister Steven Del Duca said Monday, with details on the province's plans due in the next couple of months.

Del Duca was talking about [a report](#) by a group of environmentally minded policy types calling themselves "the Ecofiscal Commission" that says road tolls are the only way to handle worsening congestion. Particularly, the report calls for adding tolls that would allow vehicles that would not otherwise qualify to use existing high-occupancy vehicle lanes.

"Road use has traditionally been freely available to anyone with a driver's licence, and the open-access nature of roads makes them vulnerable to overcrowding," the report says. "Each driver's presence imposes costs on all others, and the pollutants from each car impose costs on all people who breathe the air. Yet drivers are not bearing the full costs associated with their actions."

They're not a government body (despite the name) but they're serious people with economic chops, including former Privy Council clerk Mel Cappe, ex-TD economist and government adviser Don Drummond and Western University professor Paul Boothe. We can have all the transit and bike lanes we want, their new report says, but as long as the only direct cost for joining the slow traffic on an overcrowded road is time, that's the choice most people will continue to make.

In general, charging a bit of money to use the country's busiest roads at the busiest times has to be part of the solution, the economists say, no matter how much people hate it. Highways cost (a lot, vastly more than gas and similar taxes bring in) and we can only fit so many of them into the limited land we have.

Widespread tolls would look different in different Canadian cities, depending on how they're laid out and where their traffic pinches are. In Vancouver and Montreal, it's bridges into and out of downtown. In more spread-out cities like Toronto and Calgary, it's major expressways.

In Ottawa, it's particularly Highway 417.

The Ecofiscal Commission recommends experiments to see what works best, starting with adding tolls to high-occupancy vehicle lanes so drivers in uncrowded vehicles can buy their way in if they need to — turning HOV lanes into HOT, or high-occupancy toll, lanes. That doesn't usually mean building new roads, just dividing the ones we have into first- and second-class.

Congestion is a bigger economic problem in Toronto than it is here, particularly because clogged highways there interfere much more with trucking raw materials and factory products around. But some of the western 417 here is already kitted out with HOV lanes that could be tolled and they're coming to Regional Road 174 eventually.

Again, the egalitarian driving sensibility revolts. But you can already choose plenty of speeds for inter-city travel depending how much you're able and willing to pay. If you're not in a hurry, take a cheap bus. If you've got to get there fast, pay a lot for a plane. Conceptually, this isn't that different.

A couple of years ago, Ottawa asked for permission to put toll gates up at the eastern end of the 174, the former provincial highway that Ontario forcibly downloaded on the city in the late 1990s, to charge drivers who use the road but don't pay property taxes in the city.

The province responded pretty quickly: "Hahaha, no."

That was 2013. Since then, Premier Kathleen Wynne's government has softened on the general idea, particularly since she campaigned the following year on a promise to go on a construction spree and had to start finding ways to pay for it.

Last summer in Toronto, where congestion is a true daily horror show, the province put HOV lanes on numerous highways to speed workers, athletes and spectators along to Pan Am

Games venues, and both Wynne and Del Duca said at the time they might eventually get converted to HOT lanes.

Just how it would work — 24/7 or just some hours? fixed or varying prices? what technology? — had yet to be determined.

“We know that there is a lot of public interest on how HOT lanes could be implemented on Ontario’s highways, and we want to make sure that we get it right,” Del Duca said Monday. “This is why we will carefully consider location as well as how HOT lanes will help manage traffic congestion. While the exact locations of future HOT lanes are still under study, we do hope to be able to provide an update on our implementation plan by the end of the year.”