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Transportation

Investment pays off for 407 ETR

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Proactive highway widening, maintenance and reinvestment are among the factors that have helped Highway 407 stem recessionary impacts, a company official said last week.

Imad Nassereddine, chief traffic operations officer for the 407 ETR Concession Co. Ltd., was speaking at **Transport Futures 2009: Road Pricing and Public Acceptance Workshops** in Toronto Nov. 12 to 13.

He provided an update about the 108-kilometre toll highway that carries 378,000 trips daily across the Greater Toronto Area.

During the height of the recent economic slowdown, earlier this year, traffic on the toll highway fell two to three per cent but that has slowly started to rebound, noted Nassereddine. Early numbers from September to October show only a one per cent reduction in traffic.

“We lost more traffic during SARS than with the economic situation,” he remarked.

Also, in comparison to similar toll highways in the United States, where traffic use was down from 10 to 15 per cent over that time, the 407 has fared positively and Nassereddine credits a variety of factors.

He said the strength of the communities and industries along the highway’s corridor, along with reliability, customer service and recent construction reinvestments in the highway, have helped it combat the economic downturn.

Over the last five years the highway’s concessionaire has reinvested \$200 million into the highway for widening and safety improvements, which in turn have improved its efficiency.

The highway, once dubbed the “Lexus Highway” in its early days is far from that, said Nassereddine.

With insurance and high technology companies, nuclear facilities and Toronto’s Pearson airport among the possible communities, businesses and destinations served along its corridor, customers are starting to see the value in the 407, he said.

Nassereddine noted that the public is recognizing “the value and reliability of the trip,” time savings and customer service, whether roadside or via phone, the concession provides.

Some of the billing problems, just over 200, recently reported in Toronto media are being addressed, he said.

He noted that 50 per cent of the reported problems stretch back to 1999-2000 when the highway was relatively new (it was built in 1997) and mistakes were being made. Nassereddine added that the company

has over 15 million bills it deals with and strives to provide the best customer service possible incorporating feedback from focus groups and employees.

He advised workshop attendees that for any toll highway to gain acceptance it must ensure its technology works and is effective, billing is accurate, toll prices are reasonable and the travel time savings, convenience, reliability and safety of the road network provided are progressive and not just reactionary.

“Fix the problems before they happen,” he added.