

DAILY COMMERCIAL NEWS

AND CONSTRUCTION RECORD

November 18, 2008

Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario

Price point key to public road-toll acceptance, expert says

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Getting around the “elephant in the road” called toll roads is best done by changing attitudes and focusing on the right price point, transportation experts say.

“The absolutely most important thing is making sure the prices are efficient,” said Harry Kitchen, a professor at Trent University.

Kitchen joined an international slate of speakers and transportation experts at the Transportation Futures road-pricing forum organized by the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario (RCCAO).

Kitchen noted that a road toll could be just one in a series of mechanisms a municipality can use to raise funds for infrastructure improvements and maintenance. Road tolls are the most controversial, but Kitchen believes they will be eventually in place in Ontario, although “not in my lifetime” he says.

“User fees will get a more efficient use of service,” said Kitchen. “There is more accountability and transparency and they are a fairer way to maintain a system.”

Allowing municipalities to levy a fuel tax, congestion toll charges, taxing non-residential parking space, high occupancy toll lanes and motor vehicle registration charges, such as the one recently enacted in Toronto, are all tools municipalities must explore to tackle crumbling infrastructure, Kitchen said.

Estimates for the Greater Toronto Area and Hamilton, under a six-cent municipal fuel tax, could result in \$300 to \$420 million in funds, noted Kitchen. That equals about 6.6 per cent of the funds raised through a property tax.

Robin Lindsey, University of Alberta professor, noted that there are only 199 kilometres of road in Canada that are tolled, compared with the 8,500 km tolled in the United States. The Coquihalla Highway, Highway 407 and the Confederation Bridge are the only tolled roadways in Canada; and all were recently built.

“There is no case of a toll-free road becoming a toll,” said Lindsey.

Lindsey is a fan of the high-occupancy lane toll instead of road tolls in Ontario, since the political climate for road tolls is essentially a non-starter attitude.

“The high-occupancy tolls are modest and build upon high-occupancy lanes (already in place),” noted Lindsey.

In France, road tolls are the landscape on which the nation’s roadway system has been built, explained Nicolas Mery of France’s ecology, energy, sustainable development and planning ministry. Of the 11,000 km of roadways in France, 8,500 are privately owned and tolled, with the remaining 2,500 state funded.

Mery noted that the 13 “concessionaires” in charge of the 8,500 km of private roads are vested with the rights and duties of the state to maintain the roads. All the roads were built under a design-build-finance-operate-maintain (DBFOM) formula. Every five years, there are objectives reviews, which ensure “good quality and service given for each user.”