

Toronto Sun

By Maryam Shah - Thursday, April 25, 2013

TORONTO - The answer to whether the GTA should impose road tolls is simple, a University of Toronto transportation expert said Thursday.

If a toll is put in place, make sure it “targets congestion when and where it occurs,” said Baher Abdulhai, a professor of civil engineering and director of U of T’s Intelligent Transportation Systems Centre.

But instead of “revenue tools” — the term used by Premier Kathleen Wynne and others — Abdulhai prefers to use the term “congestion pricing.”

“You’re trying to curb people a little ... hold them back a little bit, so the system does not break down and they enter the system right at capacity,” Abdulhai said. “So you wouldn’t see the backlog that happens on a daily basis.”

The toll issue is at the heart of a hot debate right now over transportation and transit costs in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area. It is a question that pits downtowners against suburbanites and cyclists against drivers.

In an independent study presented at U of T Thursday, Abdulhai outlined a broad flexible strategy to solve the headaches of thousands who sit in gridlock every day.

The response from municipalities has been slow but “positive,” he said, adding “but it’s taking quite a bit of talking.”

In addition to variable pricing, Abdulhai also advocated for the use of traffic lights that adapt to traffic patterns in real time.

Testing shows it could save up to 40% of time wasted in traffic delays.

“The system learns and reinforces what works and avoids mistakes that happen in the past,” he said. “Much like a child that learns to walk for the first time.”

Abdulhai is scheduled to present his plan to reduce congestion to Councillors Denzil Minnan-Wong and Karen Stintz in May.

He said he likes subways as long municipalities can afford them, he thinks Queen St. and King St. should be converted to one-way flows and a “decent sensible compromise” has to be made when planning to move future populations between their homes and places of work.

“I don’t think Toronto can survive without more subways,” Abdulhai said. “There are several areas already, they can use subways immediately.”