

Toronto's war on the car

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Illustration: Black & White Photo: / 1. Dedicated rights-of-way for rapid transit: A proposed 2008 King Street pilot project would see cars restricted or banned outright for a demonstration project on King Street between Yonge Street and University Avenue. The city's \$6.1-billion, 120-kilometre light rail plan--called Transit City -- takes away car lane space in some parts of the city to make room for surface transit. 3. Road tolls/congestion pricing: Another revenue tool possibility, favoured by the head of the Greater Toronto Transportation Authority, but Mayor David Miller has already said he opposes road pricing. 5. The parking pad battle: Most of Toronto's wards are no longer accepting applications to install parking pads on privately own front-yard property. In those wards that do allow new pads, the application fee is \$288.30 (including GST), plus an annual fee of \$131.82. A strict new bylaw harmonizing the city's parking pad rules makes it tough to get a new application approved. 2. A 50¢ per hour increase to on-street metered parking in most of the city: City council approved the city-wide meter hike, Toronto's first since 1999, on May 25. 4. A \$40 per vehicle, per year municipal registration tax: This is one of the new "revenue tools" city staff have proposed. Bureaucrats are hosting public meetings on the options and will report back this month. 6. A \$100 per stall, per year parking lot tax: Also one of the revenue tool options. It would be imposed on parking lot owners, but increased costs would likely be passed on to consumers.

TORONTO - Arif Vellani's morning drive from St. Clair Avenue East and Warden Avenue has all the hallmarks of the hellish Toronto commute. First, the 25-year-old anti-fraud officer for Royal Bank crawls westward along busy St. Clair in his Honda Accord. Then he usually gets stuck on the parking lot that is the southbound Don Valley Parkway on a weekday morning.

At the end of his journey, he pays \$11 to park at a lot at Church and King streets, four blocks from his office.

"My drive still takes less time, even with all that, than it does to take the TTC," he says.

Mr. Vellani's decision to shave time off his workday by driving when he could take public transit --he lives a 10-minute stroll from Warden station -- makes him a prime target for Toronto city hall's transit advocates looking to essentially punish motorists out of their automobiles.

In Canada's largest and most congested city, drivers like Mr. Vellani, who prefer the climate-controlled oases of their cars to the sweatbox of a streetcar at 8 a.m., have become the new pariahs. In the same way that smoking went from cool to unwelcome as health consciousness grew, driving is becoming less socially acceptable in a Toronto hyperaware of environmental concerns.

As a result, driving has now joined smoking and drinking as vices that can be taxed and discouraged with little fuss -- despite the fact the car remains a necessity for any Torontonian who does not live and work on a major subway line.

"We have a very poor public transit system," says David Shiner, the lone councillor to decry Toronto's "war on the car" during a council debate on raising onstreet parking rates last month. (The hike passed.)

"So you have a need for people to be able to use their

cars and yet this city seems to be attacking driving in an unfair manner."

Witness the initiatives Toronto City Hall has taken, or is considering taking, that will make owning a car costlier and driving it more difficult:

- On-street parking: On May 25, city council voted to increase onstreet parking rates by 50¢ an hour in most of the city, the first across-the-board hike since 1999.

- Vehicle registration fee: Later this month, city staff will report to the Executive Committee on which of eight proposed new "revenue tools" it should implement. One of the likeliest to win approval is a \$40 per vehicle annual registration levy, on top of the provincial fee.

- Parking lot tax: Another revenue tool proposal, this one would see downtown lot owners pay the city \$100 per stall, per year. The hike could be passed on to customers.

- Dedicated rights-of-way for public transit: The TTC is advocating a controversial plan to close part of King Street to some traffic next summer to speed up the 504 King streetcar. Toronto's longterm transit vision also includes surface light-rail routes that will, in some parts of the city, take road space away from vehicles.

All of these plans have another stated purpose -- usually raising revenue for the cash-strapped city -- but all have the side effect of dinging drivers.

When he unfurled the lightrail plan in March, Adam Giambrone, the TTC chair, said cars will have to take a back seat.

"It's time for Toronto to put transit first," he said at the time.

Mayor David Miller is equally enthusiastic about

putting transit ahead of cars; he works a glowing mention of the light-rail scheme, known as Transit City, into most public appearances.

Nobody disputes that Toronto and its suburbs have severe traffic problems. The province estimates jams cost the GTA \$1.8-billion annually; the Toronto Board of Trade cites congestion as the top concern of CEOs.

Yet transit, at least for the foreseeable future, is no panacea.

A Statistic Canada report last summer concluded the average GTA transit commute took 106 minutes a day. That is up from 94 minutes in 1992.

Toronto has an ambitious plan to build 120 kilometres of light rail in dedicated lanes, but no money to make the \$6.1-billion blueprint a reality.

Given that riding public transit frequently takes longer than driving and does not serve everyone equally, is it fair or smart to try to pry drivers out of their cars with fees and levies?

Rod McPhail says Toronto simply has no other choice. The city's jovial director of transportation planning has a cartoon on his wall that shows streams of colourful cars pouring into what looks like a meat grinder over Union Station.

The text explains that the equivalent of four Don Valley Parkways and four QEWs flow through the station on a typical weekday. "We could never build enough roads to replace that," Mr. McPhail says.

Plus, he adds, there is nowhere within city limits to build more major thoroughfares. That leaves mass transit as the best solution. Convincing car-lovers to buy in means making driving more of a pain.

"I wouldn't say Toronto is battling the car driver because if somebody wants to drive a car in Toronto, they'll be able to continue to drive a car in Toronto. But it will be not as convenient in the future, and will likely cost you more," Mr. McPhail says.

But Richard Soberman, an emeritus civil engineering professor at the University of Toronto, says Toronto and the GTA must do more to accommodate cars. They must expand transit and roads.

A study he wrote last fall (funded by a coalition of construction companies) predicted 100,000 more cars would pour into the city every weekday by 2031, prompting perpetual gridlock or an exodus of jobs to the suburbs if politicians try to ease the burden with public transit alone.

"One size does not fit all," Mr. Soberman says. "There are people who say, 'I live in the city and I don't own a car and I go every place by TTC.' To which my response is, 'Good for you. Call me in 10

years or 15 years when maybe you're married and you got a couple of boys and girls who play hockey.'"

Mr. Giambrone, a transit rider who does not own a car, points to the same scenario of children lugging hockey bags to the rink on a bus as an example of a time when the TTC can be impractical.

"The TTC makes sense in most cases, but not all," he says. "The reality, though, and this is what cities all around the world have found from the developing to the developed world, you just can't build enough highways."

Mr. McPhail returns to the cigarette analogy: "Like smoking, there are some smokers who will never quit. There are some drivers that will never go on transit. But I truly believe that if we can offer up the proper solutions and alternatives then people will switch over time."