

Traffic solution: Embrace change or build a time machine

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Remember back in the late 19th century? City streets in large European and North American cities were clogged with horses and carriages.

Remember how civic leaders, worried about congestion, declared that the best way to get everything moving was to tax horses?

They'd tax people who owned horses. They'd tax railways because they dropped people off in the city and caused more congestion. They'd tax people by how many miles they travelled by horse. They'd charge a toll on roads where horses were used. The problem would be solved. Remember?

You probably don't because if you were alive back then you'd be dead now – and also because that never happened.

People back in 1895 – you know, the ones we moderns like to look down on for their old-fashioned ideas – solved their congestion crisis by embracing new technologies. They optimistically harnessed electric power and introduced electric trams and trolleys. They embraced the automobile and introduced buses for moving people. They embraced public transport. Take London as an example. The first deep-level tube line was put in in 1890; 17 years later, there was an entire network under London. And they did it all with nary a computer in sight.

I considered this fact last week when the transit agency Metrolinx announced its “preferred options” for fixing Metro Toronto’s congestion problem. At the same time [a survey released by GPS manufacturer TomTom found that Vancouver, Toronto and Montreal are among the most congested cities in North America](#) (second, sixth and 10th respectively).

These might seem like problems that only hurt the unhappy inhabitants of these metropolises, but what's wrong with us now will be wrong in mid-sized cities shortly. Send not for whom Toronto sucks. It sucks for thee.

And what do the folks at Metrolinx believe is the answer? Money. Taxes. It may be the root of all evil, but it sure comes in handy when you have a serious problem to solve and no real idea how to solve it.

They propose taxing (in no particular order) parking, property, sales, fuel, land, development, payrolls and kilometres travelled. The only thing they have yet to suggest taxing is sexual intercourse.

Once we've taxed everything, we can raise \$50-billion that we can spend on – wait for it – the same technologies and systems that have caused the congestion in the first place.

What could go wrong?

The minds at Metrolinx mean well. No doubt. I'm going to be charitable and maintain that the politicians across this country all want to fix our traffic woes.

The problem is that new money and old ideas are not the solution. The patient, for lack of a better analogy, has passed the stage where conservative remedies are an option.

Public transport is essential for any well-run city. But we've blown our chance at that by refusing to give public transit enough funding while at the same time refusing to open the market up enough to private transit companies. We're essentially sending Canadian tennis star Milos Raonic out to play Roger Federer using a wooden racquet.

I'd say that public transit in this country is excremental but that would be unfair to excrement, which serves an important and effective role in the daily functioning of the human anatomy.

So, if we want to fix the congestion we have two choices:

- **a)** Invent time travel, go back to the 1890s and bring back 2,000 or 3,000 people and let them fix everything.
- **b)** We need to accept that our current systems are dated. You can fund them forever, but they'll never work. We must embark on a transit revolution. Change our perceptions. Embrace new ideas and technologies, not because we're sure they will all work out, but because we know the ones we have are sorely lacking.

Instead of treating cycling as a hobby, we need to build it into our transit plan and that means more lanes and also entire streets dedicated to bikes.

At the same time, stop demonizing the automobile. Yes, it contributes to pollution but it also facilitates our society. If you like medicine, a modern economy, hey, if you like your iPad, those all rely on an economy in which trucks and cars play a big role. A car used correctly is not a bad thing. It's when you take your car three blocks to the corner store that matters get ugly.

There is no shortage of technological solutions. In China, they are developing "straddling buses" that can carry 1,200 passengers, don't take up road space and are partially solar powered. In Japan, they're using dual-mode vehicles such as the "track-riding" bus.

You don't have to look far afield to find new answers. A team at the University of Toronto's Intelligent Transportation Systems Centre released a report last week entitled *Congestion*

Management in the GTHA: Balancing the Inverted Pendulum. It was created for the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario (which is part of a coalition that gives input to Metrolinx).

Among the report's suggestions are Intelligent Transportation Systems such as smart, "self-learning" traffic lights that can lessen delays and increase flow. It suggests "dynamic congestion pricing" that would target congestion areas and an "open service innovation model" that would "harness the collective intelligence of the community."

Are these guaranteed hits? Who knows? We all know, however, that if we continue to do what we've been doing (absolutely nothing), congestion will grow worse.

So solution-wise, I'm up for an "open service innovation model," but I'm also up for seven angry undergrads in a hot-boxed dorm room. I'm up for almost anything, just so long as it's new.

Please, just don't throw a bunch of taxes at a problem in order to see which one of them sticks.