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Gunnar Söderholm and Martin Collier discuss the benefits of road pricing at the recent Transport Futures summit.

Road pricing an effective congestion fighter, say experts

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Road pricing is one of the best ways to affect a behavioural shift when it comes to transportation modes, say world transportation leaders.

Speaking at the recent [Transport Futures: Mobility Pricing Summit](#), Charles Howard of the Puget Sound Regional Council detailed his experience with road tolls and high occupancy toll (HOT) lanes.

When the Tacoma Narrows Bridge opened in 2007, traffic went down about 34 per cent and traffic flowed pretty freely.

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“(Residents) discovered there was a real value proposition for the communities in that toll bridge<0x2026>people realized there was a connection between that payment and that benefit,” he said.

Though, just as predicted, there was an 11 per cent increase of traffic on the parallel 190 bridge and an increase of nine per cent on another arterial corridor. Total traffic across the lake went down six per cent.

“It’s actually become more efficient because the travel has gone down more than the person trips. Obviously we’ve had a shift to transit and that’s been helpful.”

Howard noted that in the council’s studies, as the use of other modes of transportation are encouraged, there is a dropping off of the gas tax in the coming decades. Their financial strategy keeps traditional funding such as gas and sales taxes in the short-term and then substitute that funding for a user fee, like a vehicle-miles traveled fee and then transitions into a full freeway system toll in the 2030s. There is political support for road pricing in the region.

Gunnar Söderholm spoke about introducing congestion charges in the city of Stockholm, Sweden. When the seventh-month trial began, residents were skeptical but after the pilot it received buy-in from residents as they saw how dramatically it reduced congestion.

Since it was reintroduced on Aug. 1, 2007, there has been no increase in traffic in and out of the zone, despite a population increase. Söderholm said if the city had not introduced the charge, traffic would be 25 per cent higher than it currently is.

Most in Stockholm use transit and bikes to commute. Now almost 70 per cent of citizens are in favour of the congestion charges.

“Try it. Compared to almost any other investment you do in infrastructure, a couple of hundred million Canadian dollars ain’t that much,” he said.

“Even if it doesn’t work, if you don’t have the effect (you want), you will learn a lot. We have added a lot of studies and know much more and are much better prepared to plan for traffic.”

In Metro Vancouver, Nancy Olewiler, the director of the School of Public Policy at Simon Fraser University and TransLink Canada board chair, says there needs to be a suite of policies to move the agenda forward on transportation planning.

A possible policy suite could include sales taxes at the regional level; the federal fuel excise tax becoming a carbon and air pollution tax; the transfer of federal gas tax to public infrastructure that reduce greenhouse gases; and vehicle kilometres travelled charges as a principal user-fee with a pilot.

She said there needs to be a political will.

“Your premier has at least committed to transportation and looking for solutions. Our premier doesn’t have a commitment that she’s made public yet,” she said at the event held in Toronto.

“We are far away from having a specific road pricing policy but at least the general concept is there.”

David King, assistant professor of urban planning at Columbia University, noted that the toll policies being discussed for passenger vehicles also apply to freight impact goods movement.

He said around 90 per cent of goods for New York City are shipped over the George Washington Bridge, which tolls trucks at \$13 per axle. He also noted that if trucks are priced at such rates, they could drive longer distances to avoid tolls, impacting both the price of goods and emissions into the environment.

King said it could be a huge issue in the future as freight is expected to grow much faster than passenger travel.

“The toll policy and the financing policies that we adopt now thinking primarily about passenger travel may have unintended effects as we’re thinking about goods movement and as we’re thinking about freight,” he said.

“We need to be very cognizant and very careful when we’re talking about passenger travel pricing in the context of freight.”

Some next steps include looking at the impact that road pricing has on the competitiveness of ports and a proposed rebalancing for freight pricing.