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It's time for Torontonians to talk about tolls

By Marcus Gee

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They reduce congestion, cut emissions and pay for themselves. So why can't Toronto have a sensible debate?

Conventional wisdom holds that talking about road tolls in Toronto is the equivalent of drinking hemlock - pure political poison. But what if that is wrong? What if Torontonians are quite ready to accept toll roads if they hear a compelling argument for why they make sense?

That is the hopeful contention of Martin Collier, a transportation consultant who is waging a lonely crusade to put a price on driving city roads and highways. As head of Healthy Transport Consulting, which advises government and businesses on transportation issues, Mr. Collier talks about road tolls with the passion of a true believer. Give him half a chance and he will chew your ear off about all the great things that they will do, from reducing traffic congestion and raising money for public transit to funding road maintenance and cutting smog.

Did you know that there used to be a toll gate in Yorkville in the 1800s? On Kingston Road, too. Today, he points out, toll roads are common in countries as varied as the United States, France, Italy, China, Japan, Israel and Mexico. With modern gizmos - licence-plate readers, transponders and, now, GPS - it's getting easier to charge drivers for their road use and simpler for drivers to pay. The Dutch are looking to roll out road pricing across the country with a system that uses cellphone signals.

The merits are clear. Tolloed roads pay for themselves, so governments can't plead poverty and leave them to rot. Have you driven the goat track known as the Gardiner Expressway out of Toronto lately? Why does a poor country like China have way better expressways than Canada?

Tolls cut congestion by encouraging commuters to use transit, or, when higher tolls are applied during rush hours, drive in off-peak periods. When Stockholm brought in congestion tolls, traffic fell by a quarter, automobile emissions dropped 14 per cent and transit use jumped (partly because, with fewer traffic jams, buses could get through their routes quicker).

When you apply a price to anything, people use it more judiciously. "We know the price of an orange or a pair of socks or a transit ride, we just don't know it for roads," Mr. Collier says. "If we don't know what it costs, we overuse it."

In most places, views like his would not mark you out as a crank. Here, Mr. Collier is standing on the far margins. In Toronto, sadly, it has proved impossible to debate the merits of tolls, much less introduce them. In the 2003 election campaign, mayoral candidate David Miller took a pasting for daring even to muse about the possibility of tolling roads. The paster-in-chief: his rival John Tory, who is expected to run again in next year's race for mayor.

The other big-name candidate in the 2010 contest, George Smitherman, spent years serving in an Ontario government that has refused to contemplate tolls on major 400 series highways and that waged a futile battle over toll rates and rules for the privately run 407 highway. On

city council, the mere mention of tolls is bound to work right-leaning councillors into another froth over the so-called "war on the car."

Even the regional transit agency, Metrolinx, can't rouse itself to come out point-blank for tolls. It has hinted it would like them to help pay for its \$50-billion expansion, but its head, Rob Prichard, says such options are politically "radioactive."

Mr. Collier refuses to be discouraged. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development just came out with a report decrying Toronto's clogged roads and recommending tolling. A high-level panel that reported to Mayor Miller on budget issues last year said that tolling Toronto highways could raise \$700-million for better transit.

London's at-first controversial downtown congestion charge was soon hailed as a triumph for its then-mayor, Ken Livingstone. Stockholm, Mr. Collier notes, started with a pilot project, then held a referendum on tolling. Couldn't Toronto try a six-month pilot with tolls on, say, the Don Valley Parkway, without the world coming to an end?

Today, Mr. Collier will preside at a Toronto conference to talk not so much about the virtues of road tolls, but about how to talk about road tolls. "I just want people to discuss, okay, can we talk about this in a rational, respectful way, without getting upset with each other and saying, 'Oh, I've already paid my taxes.' If Ghana and South Africa and Singapore can talk about tolls, why not us?"

It doesn't seem too much to ask. Road tolls have been studied, debated and introduced all over the world. France has had them since 1955. Here our ability to confront real issues has become so stunted by fear of controversy that we can't even discuss proven ideas with obvious merit. Tolling is one of them. Poisonous or not, it's time to put the idea to the city and have it out.

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