

## It may be end of the road for road toll opposition

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Congestion is expected to cost the Toronto region up to \$15 billion annually by 2031.

But one of the most obvious and unpopular answers to the problem – road tolls, also known as congestion pricing – remains a largely verboten subject in Ontario, even though user fees are already used or under discussion globally, from Hong Kong to Ghana.

"I call it the elephant in the road, because for some reason we can't talk about it," said Martin Collier.

He's a founder of the Transport Futures Conference, which will gather an international panel of road pricing experts in Toronto on Thursday.

The second annual conference is one sign that, after years of knee-jerk opposition, a serious exploration of the impact of user fees may finally be foisted upon Toronto-area drivers and politicians.

On Monday, a report by the Paris-based Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development suggested that gridlock is hobbling the region's productivity to the tune of \$2.7 billion annually and costing consumers at least \$3.3 billion a year.

Next week, the Metrolinx board of directors will gather for a closed-door discussion on the problem of raising nearly \$40 billion to help pay for transportation improvements the agency has prescribed for the region in the next 25 years. Inevitably, road tolls will be part of that conversation.

"The most expensive thing to do is to do nothing and incur this rapidly growing cost of congestion," said Metrolinx CEO Rob Prichard, who says the region's problem is different from that of some other cities.

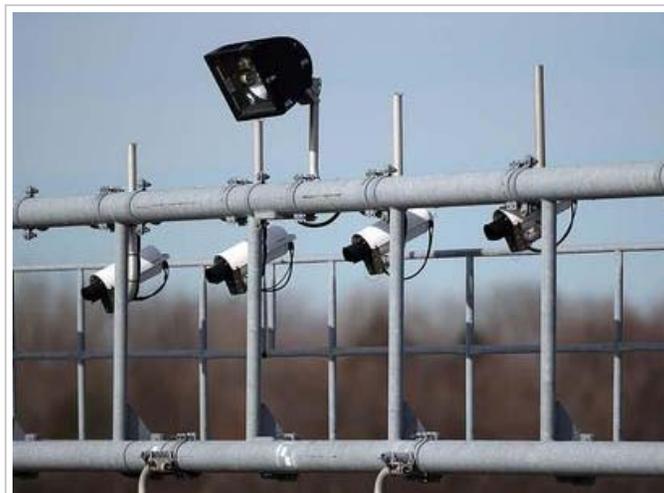
"The problems of congestion are as acute on the QEW in Mississauga as they are on the 404 in York as they are on the 401 in Pickering as they are on the DVP and Gardiner in Toronto. It is not the same challenge as London faced, with a small, exceptionally dense core with 85 per cent of people using transit.

"The challenge of the Greater Toronto Hamilton Area is across the region, with highly congested highways, not just for the driver coming downtown but for the driver crossing the region east to west," he said.

Still, most people – though they expect to pay for every other form of transportation from air travel to transit – believe that once roads are built they should be free, said Collier. And there's more than money to be gained, he said, if tolls help shift driving habits so people won't spend a litre of gas to go out and buy a litre of milk.

But when it comes to road pricing, people often have to try it before they're going to like it, says University of Alberta economics professor Robin Lindsey, who is speaking at Thursday's conference.

"The answer is letting people experience the system on a trial basis," he said. "That was done in Stockholm and it was successful. People



Congestion is forcing talk about the need for more toll highways — but readers are fuming about the 407's billing practices.

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saw congestion was down."

Typically, 60 to 70 per cent of people are against tolls until they're tried. But studies show that the same percentage will accept them once they see the impact on ease of travel and quality of life.

Knowing that the revenue from tolls will go directly into transit also boosts public acceptance.

More information on Thursday's road pricing conference is available at [www.transportfutures.ca](http://www.transportfutures.ca).