

Will drivers swallow road tolls' bitter pill?

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It used to be that transportation officials came to Toronto to learn.

Now U.S. and European experts are coming here to teach us how to move ahead on the politically thorny issue of road tolls.

That observation, from Andy Manahan of the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario, came at the opening Thursday of the Transport Futures Conference devoted to road tolls, used around the world to fund new construction and transit, and reduce congestion and pollution.

Here are three approaches to tolls that about 75 Toronto-area transportation consultants, government officials and environmentalists heard about at the event.

MINNEAPOLIS

System: In 2005, a 13-kilometre HOV lane on Interstate 394 was converted to a HOT (High Occupancy Toll) lane dubbed the MnPASS. It gives solo drivers the option of paying to use a less congested lane, while carpoolers use it for free. As on Ontario's HOV lanes, drivers may enter or exit only at certain points.

Why: Minnesotans don't like tolls, but people recognized traffic as a big problem and the funds weren't there to improve roads, said Ken Buckeye of the state's transportation department.

Cost: Changes with the flow; if there are too many drivers in the HOT lane, price goes up. Real-time signs on the route show the cost: \$1 to \$4 at rush hour; daily maximum \$8.

Results: Traffic volume in the underused lane has risen by as much as 33 per cent, but 90 per cent of the time the speed limit is maintained; drivers move as much as 15 per cent faster. In 2008, the system raised \$200,000 over the \$1 million it took to run.

Future: Recently, a 5-kilometre stretch was opened on I-35 that will be expanded to 23 kilometres.

STOCKHOLM

System: Since 2005, congestion tolls have been charged entering or leaving a 47-square-kilometre area of this city of 2 million, billed as the Green Capital of Europe.

Cost: About 2 euros in peak hours with a 6-euro daily maximum.

Results: Morning rush travel times have improved by 50 per cent and emissions declined by 10 to 14 per cent. Transit ridership has increased 7 per cent and 78 per cent of downtown commuters use transit.

Future: 80 to 100 million euros raised per year help buy transit enhancements, such as a new city tram line, suburban lines, a transit tunnel under the city slated for 2015.

LONDON

System: A toll cordon around the city centre.

Why: London's average traffic speeds had slowed to 14-16 km/h when Mayor Ken Livingston introduced the cordon in 2003.

Cost: Now £10, or £9 if paid directly from a bank account.

Results: In four years, traffic dropped by 15 per cent and congestion by 26 per cent, according to consultant Andrew Price. Traffic speeds increased only about 3 km/h on average, but given the city's growth, that's vastly better than what it might have been.

Future: In 2007, over strong local opposition, the cordon was extended to cover a more residential area, and generated £137 million in revenue. A new mayor has since decided to dismantle the extension, and a controversial plan to impose a £25 day charge for high-emission vehicles was scrapped.