

Road tolls for whom, Transport Canada asks

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Despite cancelling a study on road tolls just before the fall election, the federal transportation department was among the key sponsors of a Toronto conference yesterday on road pricing featuring experts from Europe and the United States.

Transport Canada officials cancelled a study of road pricing on Sept. 6, the same day a story about the study appeared in The Globe and Mail and the day before the federal election was called.

But yesterday, Transport Canada was at the top of a list of sponsors of the Transportation Futures Forum, a conference at a downtown Toronto hotel featuring officials involved in road-pricing schemes - including central London's famous congestion charge.

One of the conference organizers - Andy Manahan of the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario - said they agreed not to publicize the sponsorship until after the election: "They were actually saying we have to keep quiet, for obvious reasons, because Harper doesn't want to be questioned on the campaign trail about new taxes."

David MacIsaac, a senior Transport Canada adviser taking part in yesterday's conference, said the department's mandate is to fund research in transportation demand management, a wide array of policies that includes not just tolls but carpooling and other measures.

"If you look at the evidence ... pricing is pretty much a guaranteed way to reduce greenhouse gases in the transportation sector," Mr. MacIsaac said.

He also said the cancelled study on congestion charging would in fact go ahead, but said he did not know why it was cancelled.

While many cities around the world have either implemented or are exploring the idea, the concept has so far gained little ground in most of Canada, although Montreal is looking at it.

Metrolinx, Ontario's Toronto-region transportation planning agency, has put off any suggestion of tolls to pay for its \$50-billion transit plan until 2013, and Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty has repeatedly ruled out road tolls.

Speaking to the audience of more than 100 bureaucrats, academics and consultants, Reg Evans, a consultant evaluating the effects of London's congestion charge for the city's transport agency, warned there was little appetite now in Britain for new toll schemes, despite the success of London's scheme in reducing car traffic by a third.

He said the Labour government backed away from expanding road pricing nationwide, or to other British cities, in the face of a 1.7-million-strong online petition last year.

Germa Bakker, project manager of Amsterdam's road-pricing pilot project, said the Netherlands' planned national road-pricing scheme, expected to start in 2012, will actually be revenue neutral. All other taxes applied to gas and automobiles will be phased out: "The principle is, the people who drive a lot will pay a lot."

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