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For whom the road tolls

'Road pricing' unavoidable to fix traffic woes: Experts

By BRYN WEESE, SUN MEDIA

Drivers in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area had better start asking themselves what their daily commute is worth.

The new buzz phrase around the region is road pricing, a glorified albeit more comprehensive word that means tolls.

On Monday -- the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development released a 200-plus page report that found congestion is costing the GTHA \$3.3 billion annually in lost productivity.

Other less-cheery reports have almost doubled the OECD's estimates, and have projected congestion could annually cost the region \$15 billion by 2015.

The Toronto Transit Commission is forecasting huge deficits, and is discussing a 25-cent fare hike this week, even though they know it'll push millions off the system.

Both the federal and provincial governments are also out of cash, with the province recently announcing a record \$24.7-billion deficit this year. Funds for transit and roads aren't likely forthcoming from them.

Enter the road-pricing debate.

"Probably the most expensive thing to do would be to do nothing," said Rob Prichard, president and CEO of Metrolinx, the provincial agency responsible for seeing through an ambitious \$50-billion, 25-year reformation of transit and transportation in the GTHA. "If we're going to act, we have to think through how to pay for it, and that's the task ahead."

Metrolinx has until June 2013 to present the province with an investment strategy to pay for its Big Move plan.

Proponents of making motorists pay for the driving they do argue it takes cars off the road, provides sustainable funding for transit systems and road infrastructure.

And these days, options for pricing the roads are myriad and range from daily fees to drive in a city centre to electronic tracking devices that bill drivers monthly for distances driven, on which roads, and at what times.

Earlier proposals have suggested a 10-cent/km toll for the Gardiner, Don Valley Parkway and 400-series highways. For a Hamilton-to-Toronto commuter, that could cost \$6.70 a day, \$268 a month, or \$3,216 a year.

But there are other tools available other than road tolls, including a tax on weekday parking spaces or a higher fuel tax, to name but a few.

But whatever the means of collection, the money needed to fund the Big Move can't be swallowed up by general government coffers.

"People don't want to face higher taxes without greater benefit," Prichard said, adding road pricing is only one of "many, many instruments" Metrolinx will be looking at in the coming years.

Harvey Kitchen, an economics professor at Trent University with a special interest in public policy, says road pricing in the GTHA is "inevitable."

"Something has to be done. We have to get some cars off the road, we have to get better public transit and we're going to have to pay for it in the future," he said.

But like private health care, even quietly muttering the idea is political suicide.

In Stockholm, municipal legislators were forced by the Swedish government to implement a daily congestion tax of between \$2 and \$8 on cars, even though early polling suggested it had "huge opposition," according to Gunner Soderholm, who was in charge of that city's congestion tax implementation in '07.

"The problem is ... people don't understand the benefit of the scheme until it's there," he said, noting drivers are now in favour of the congestion tax.

But it's not all peachy-keen for governments post-road tolls.

Last year, Londoners soundly defeated Mayor Ken Livingstone, champion of the congestion charge, who had doubled the cordoned size, hiked the fee, and proposed even stiffer measures against 4-wheel-drive vehicles and heavy polluters.

But before GTHA residents can crucify politicians for introducing road tolls, the discussion must first begin.

Last week, transportation consultant Marti Collier organized the Transport Futures Workshop in Toronto to discuss road pricing. About 85 people attended, many from government agencies, and key stakeholder groups.

Collier was pleased with the turnout.

"It's something we just have to discuss and get all the public involved in it," he said.

PRO ROAD TOLLS

Andy Manahan

Executive director of RCCAO

q. Why does the RCCAO care about road tolls?

"We're trying to be progressive, and one of the things the RCCAO is interested in is sustainable infrastructure funding, and we know that certain models right now are insufficient to pay for the infrastructure that's needed ... It's about city building, and making sure that this region is competitive economically on the global stage"

q. How do you sell road pricing to the general public?

"You have to be very transparent with the public as to what the revenues generated from road pricing are going to be used for. I think the way to sell this to the public is to earmark road pricing back into transportation and transit projects"

q. Don't drivers already pay to drive through gas taxes?

"Yes, but gas taxes are a very blunt instrument. Sure the more you drive the more you pay, but it's not really pricing the use of that road ... All of those things tend to go into general revenue"

AGAINST TOLLS

Edyta Zdancewicz

A spokesman for the CAA

q. Why does the CAA care about road tolls?

"We've got 5 million members across the country, and our members are not in favour of road tolls, or road pricing, whichever name you do decide to give it. It's something that they have said they are categorically not in favour of"

q. Why are your members opposed to road tolls?

"A lot of them feel they've already invested a lot of money in being able to drive their automobiles -- i.e. vehicle taxes, gas taxes, tire taxes, separate taxes they incur depending on what municipality they live in. They feel that they've already spent a lot of money and they'd like to have that money used for roads"

q. Do you think CAA members would ever support a road pricing scheme in the GTHA?

"Until you get to a point where all of that money has been used up on roads and transit and you still can't get enough, that would probably be the only time where drivers may have an appetite for road pricing ... As of right now, drivers have told us ... road tolls are not something they want"