

# DAILY COMMERCIAL NEWS

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Transportation

Dialogue, education key in getting public to accept road tolls, U.S. transit officials say

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Because initial aversion to user-pay traffic systems is automatic, transparency and extensive public dialogue are important in attempting to implement them, note two American transit officials.

“If you start the debate, with a long-range planning process, it appears that the public can be educated,” said Patrick DeCorla-Souza, manager for tolling and pricing, office of innovative program delivery at the Federal Highway Administration, United States of America.

DeCorla-Souza recently spoke at Transport Futures, Road Pricing and Public Acceptance Workshops in Toronto.

He covered a variety of experiences regarding toll roads and congestion pricing concepts in American cities such as Seattle and New York.

Among the lessons learned by the FHA in conjunction with local governments in Seattle, for instance, is that when a public understands authorities are short of money, they are willing to look at alternatives. Also, clear explanations on where revenue generated by tolls goes is critical.

“The public inevitably prefers tolls to taxes because you can see where the money is going,” DeCorla-Souza noted.

Lengthy public consultation by Seattle officials helped explain the benefits of an electronic toll system for the local state route 520 bridge.

The tolling of this bridge is the first time in the United States that tolls are imposed on an existing untolled bridge.

The benefits expressed in public consultation and apparently agreed upon and understood are quicker, more reliable rides, less stop-and-go traffic and benefits to the environment with less idling time.

The new 520 bridge, scheduled to open in 2014, when completed will include six lanes, with two general-purpose lanes and one carpool lane in each direction, also improving local transit service.

In Minnesota, locals have been “very averse” to tolls since their most common shared tolling experienced were the tolls they experienced on drives to Chicago, noted Kenneth Buckeye, with the Minnesota Department of Transportation.

That driving experience for Minnesotans, of having to slow down and wait in lines, in order to pay tolls, made for a challenging user landscape to tackle in 1993, when the state developed toll road public-private partnership legislation, Buckeye said.

When the state began to develop its I394 MnPASS optional electronic toll road project, based on distanced-based fees, it was not until 2003 when the project's high occupancy toll lanes were introduced.

The 10 years of consultation from legislation to reality for the project entailed extensive outreach, Buckeye said.

Getting public support for the next phase of the I394 MnPASS then took just four years once the public had experience with it and saw the benefits.