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Transportation Futures – Road Pricing Forum

Successful implementation of road tolls requires leadership, panel says

VINCE VERSACE

staff writer

Getting roads to pay for themselves requires leadership and use of innovative technology, a roundtable panel stressed at the inaugural Transportation Futures road pricing forum.

“These are city issues and you need a political champion or executive-style mayor,” said Dr. Mario Iacobacci, head of the Centre for Transportation Infrastructure at the Conference Board of Canada.

“You have to tackle the ‘tax grab’ aspect of things like a congestion charge. People have to believe the funds will be allocated to high-priority projects.”

The roundtable panel broke down various infrastructure fundraising tools discussed during the day-long forum in downtown Toronto.

From London’s congestion charge to the concept of tolled high-occupancy lanes on highways, the panelists all stressed that governments sooner or later will have to entertain alternative fundraising models. Growing cities and crumbling infrastructure are not a formula for competitive economic growth.

“I think sometimes you need a crisis situation in order to act,” Andy Manahan, executive director of the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario (RCCAO).

“This (the current economic downturn), may be the opportunity to put road pricing forward.”

Funds generated through road tolls and vehicle registration fees, such as that enacted in Toronto recently, need to be transparently earmarked for infrastructure maintenance and growth, added Manahan. The main problem with Toronto’s vehicle registration fee is that the money collected goes into the “black hole” of general revenue, he said.

JD Hassan, vice-president of business development at Skymeter Corporation, said the technology exists for municipalities to set up trials on what may be feasible concerning road charging. Hassan also said that strong political leadership is needed explore such options.

“We have the technology and I think it is time to start,” said Hassan. “We need to start trials now. We do not even know what we do not know yet.”

The way in which then-London mayor Ken Livingstone drove the agenda on establishing the downtown congestion charge in England’s capital was applauded by all panelists. Iacobacci lived in London at the time the charge was introduced and he recalled that the traffic chaos opponents of the charge warned about never materialized.

Amsterdam’s trial road-pricing program of charging for every kilometer driven in the city and Germany’s satellite-based flexible toll system, for trucks over 12 tonnes, are examples of projects that can be explored in Canada, panelists said.

The funds generated in the Amsterdam program will be directed to infrastructure. The thrust of the German program is to achieve the environmentally friendly operation of freight trucks in the country.

Getting traction on any such ideas in Ontario, let alone across the country, requires three key components, noted Manahan.

“There are the ‘Three Ls’ to make it work,” said Manahan.

“Leadership. Legislative framework. Long-term thinking and plans.”