

York Region traffic takes its 'toll'



For whom the road tolls. Traffic congestion comes with population growth. One traffic expert thinks toll roads could become of a fact of life for York Region's drivers. *File Photo*

by David Fleischer

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Urban sprawl can be your friend, or at least not as bad as you think.

The eyebrow-raising argument was made by Dr. Alex Anas Thursday at a conference about how road tolls and our transportation choices affect the way we live.

An economist from the State University of New York at Buffalo, Dr. Anas developed a model to anticipate growth in the Chicago, Ill. area. He found as new employment centres develop in the suburbs, there are fewer suburb-to-downtown trips.

If enough roads and transit are in place, that should mean fewer long commutes and congestion, he said.

Mr. Anas was one of the speakers at the third Transport Futures conference, a series launched two years ago by transportation consultant Marty Collier.

Road tolls haven't gained much traction, Mr. Collier said.

He wanted to start looking at how tolls impact land use, however, he realized drivers needed time to digest the concept first and now that's happening, he said.

Tolls remain unpopular, but drivers understand they're inevitable, he said. "We're 20 years behind. Why can't we just have the discussion?"

If there was one thing on which speakers agreed, it was whatever road pricing scheme is introduced in the GTA, it will have to be done right.

"We're going to have to look for new revenue and we're going to have to take that to fund the system," transportation expert Dr. Richard Soberman said.

During an irreverent assessment of transit past, present and future, Mr. Soberman expressed some skepticism about the province's ambitious Big Move plan, which calls for \$50 billion in transit funding during the next 20 years.

The GTA's population grew 45 per cent from 1986 to 2006, however, transit use grew just 15 per cent.

By comparison, the same growth is expected in the next two decades, but transit use is expected to increase 132 per cent.

That kind of change will require a lot more than just infrastructure, Mr. Soberman said, including making transit appealing, not to just to riders who have no choice, but to those who could otherwise take their car.

Transportation and land use are two sides of the same coin. You can't manage growth unless you deal with both sides of the equation, Mr. Soberman said.

How road tolls could be implemented is a major sticking point, Urban Strategies partner Melanie Hare said.

The planning firm has done extensive work in York, including developing Richmond Hill's plan to convert the Yonge St.-Hwy. 7 district into a dense, mixed-use community.

New suburban hubs are ambitious, but have the capacity to develop even further she said, pointing to Vaughan Metropolitan Centre project.

The province's proactive role in planning has changed the landscape, but we will have to see if suburban homebuyers and developers adjust to the new, denser reality, Ms Hare said.

"We're not the enemy. We want to be part and parcel of the solution," Heron Homes and Heathwood Homes president Hugh Heron said, noting residents of one of its Richmond Hill projects were given free one-year transit passes.

But the only thing people hate more than sprawl is intensification, Canadian Urban Institute chief executive officer Michael Fenn said.

Suburbanites will need to see the benefit of leaving their cars home before embracing transit, he said.

In the meantime, various policies, implemented worldwide, could come to the GTA.

For instance, motorists could pay a fee to drive to downtown Toronto. However, that could backfire if downtown businesses move, Dr. Anas argued.

On the other hand, introducing a fuel tax or another system that taxes driving on all roads would leave jobs downtown, encourage residents to live closer to their workplaces and ultimately reduce sprawl, he said.

Edinburgh-based planner Sue Flack pointed out it is difficult to start by introducing smart growth in the suburbs.

It's a situation already evident in Markham's Cornell, a new urbanist community, still largely car-dependent because of its relatively remote location and distance from transit.

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