

# Is road-tolls fix running out of gas?

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December 22, 2008

Just as Toronto's below-the-radar dialogue over road tolls starts to show signs of moving beyond guaranteed-death-wish status for politicians, a likely recession arrives and threatens to put that progress into reverse.

Tolls, or "road pricing" as the experts call it, will always make politicians itchy. Metrolinx, the province's Toronto-area transportation planning body, put off bringing up tolls to pay for its \$50-billion master plan until 2013, although its board of local politicians now wants to start a "conversation" on the concept and other ideas such as special parking taxes.

But European road-pricing experts at a recent Toronto conference - sponsored by Transport Canada but then disavowed by the minister the next day - suggested some new ways to convince wary citizens of the merits of tackling traffic congestion with a pay-as-you-drive toll plan.

The basic arguments for tolling roadways by the kilometre, and charging a premium in rush hour, are simple. It persuades enough drivers to wait until after the rush (or to take transit, or carpool) easing economy-strangling congestion and dehumanizing lengthy commutes. So drivers would actually get something for their money, and the new revenue could be used to build subways or light-rail lines, or maintain roads.

But now, even in tax-loving Europe, the idea is in retreat. Voters in Manchester last week just trounced a proposed London-style "congestion charge" scheme in their city, and the British government has already backed away from a possible national road-pricing system. London's new mayor might preside over the scaling back of the £8 (\$15) congestion-charging zone's unpopular western extension.

(Most local experts and politicians reject a "congestion charge" for Toronto, since the region's real traffic problems are on its suburban periphery where public transit is almost non-existent and growth has been exponential. But Mayor David Miller and others have suggested tolling part or all of the 400-series highways.)

One way to make the hard sell for tolls comes from Amsterdam, where 1,000 volunteers - yes, volunteers - are to sign up for a road-pricing pilot project, after 30 years of failed government attempts at a broad-based nationwide scheme.

As Germa Bakker, the project manager, explained to the road-tolls conference, the new per-kilometre charge, deducted by satellite from a transponder in each car, will be

revenue neutral. I know, we've heard that idea before somewhere, and the product didn't sell.

Here's how it will work in the Netherlands: Each road-pricing participant will receive a €100 (\$170) refund to make up for huge amount of fixed taxes motorists there already pay each year just to own cars. Drivers will then pay the equivalent of 5 cents a kilometre to drive outside of rush hour, and 19 cents during rush hour. Those who avoid peak times and drive less could end up saving some money, turning a new toll into a tax cut.

Could it work here? Canadians do not face the huge fixed taxes that the Dutch already pay, meaning the refund idea would be less appealing.

Perhaps it is inevitable that this idea will go into hibernation. Governments are preparing to throw wads of cash at infrastructure such as transit anyway, making toll revenue less necessary.

And traffic congestion, unfortunately, may be about to ease on its own, as the recession reduces the number of commuters with jobs to go to each morning.