

Premier criticized for stance opposing road tolls



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Premier Christy Clark's vow to block new road or bridge tolls is being dismissed as unproductive and perhaps irrelevant by TransLink's board chair.

Nancy Olewiler said Clark's [statement in Langley](#) March 24 rejecting universal road pricing or tolling may pose a barrier to solving TransLink's long-term funding challenge and expanding the transit system in Metro Vancouver.

"We're going to wait and see whether that kind of statement becomes policy or not," Olewiler said in a Black Press interview.

"We have a current premier who has made an announcement. But that isn't too helpful in terms of deciding how to move forward."

She made the comments after being asked about TransLink's plans to rebuild the [aging Pattullo Bridge](#) and whether the replacement will be tolled.

Olewiler said that's one example of why the province needs to reform its current tolling policy, which allows tolls only on new infrastructure and only if there's a reasonable free alternative.

The provincial tolling policy blocks any move to road pricing, or to apply small tolls to all bridges in the region, as Surrey Mayor Dianne Watts has repeatedly proposed.

The Port Mann Bridge was tolled on the basis the Pattullo offers a viable free alternative, but critics say that already questionable logic falls apart if both the Pattullo and the [Massey Tunnel](#) are also replaced with toll bridges.

"Right now, if you have to have a free alternative, I don't know what the free alternative to the Pattullo would be," Olewiler said. "The Alex Fraser? Not so much. A canoe?"

Metro Vancouver mayors are united in calling for various new revenue tools to fund transit expansion, including road pricing over the longer term.

Transportation Minister Mary Polak previously said mayors can explore [road pricing](#) but must build substantial public support if the province is to consider approving it.

There are many potential permutations of road pricing, but some mayors suggest it would see motorists pay small per kilometre fees to drive any significant distance in the region, rather than larger tolls only at certain bridges. There's also been talk that it could partly replace other existing taxes.

"Road pricing isn't something that can happen today or tomorrow, but it would be nice to know it's something we can continue to look at," Olewiler said.

Mayors' Council chair Richard Walton the mayors are continuing their discussions with Polak this month and as far as he is aware nothing has been taken off the table.

Walton said the aim is to have a structured public discussion on road pricing over the next year or two, adding it would be a major policy shift that should not be rushed.

"If anyone in senior government dismisses road pricing right now before there's even a meaningful public dialogue, I don't think that's good policy," he said.

"We're hoping all the political parties will approach this with an open mind, rather than set policy before the research and public discussion has taken place."

Walton also suggested Clark is out of step with business groups like the B.C. Chamber of Commerce, which endorses a serious look at road pricing.

"The business community, the mainstay of the Liberal party, are supportive in moving in this direction. So there's a bit of a disconnect right now."

Olewiler said a short list of options to replace the Pattullo will go out to public consultations in mid-May.

She said Surrey and New Westminster municipal reps have agreed to work together to try to find a mutually agreeable configuration of a new bridge, which New West residents fear will increase local traffic.

Olewiler said the province also needs to be part of the Pattullo discussion to deal with routing of trucks and connections to provincial highways like the South Fraser Perimeter Road and Highway 1.

Those talks with government will have to wait until after the election, she said, but added it's important to "make sure the big picture is looked at and this isn't just our little bridge in the middle of it."

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