

With the transit tax on stage, road pricing waits in the wings

Officials study systems used elsewhere to devise a workable strategy for Metro Vancouver

BY KELLY SINOSKI, VANCOUVER SUN APRIL 4, 2015 12:15 PM



Congestion pricing, which is used in London and Stockholm, could work in downtown Vancouver but wouldn't be effective across the region, said North Vancouver District Mayor Richard Walton.

Photograph by: DARRYL DYCK, THE CANADIAN PRESS

METRO VANCOUVER -- As Metro Vancouver residents wrestle with a 0.5-per-cent sales tax increase for transportation, regional mayors are preparing for an even bigger ask: a road pricing scheme that could potentially see tolls on all roads and bridges or charging drivers a fee-per-distance travelled.

What form the scheme will take has yet to be determined, but it is slated to come into effect five to seven years after the transportation plebiscite wraps up this spring.

But mayors acknowledge they could face a roadblock in their plans if voters reject the proposed sales tax.

"It doesn't hinge on a Yes or No vote," said Greg Moore, spokesman for the mayors' council. "But if the first part of the plan doesn't get funded, what do you do? The mayors are going to have to make that decision after we get through this referendum.

"We haven't put any time or debate to this item."

Metro mayors have long eyed road pricing as a long-term funding source to expand transportation across the region. The intent is that it would eventually replace existing fees such as the gas tax, which has seen falling revenues as vehicles become more efficient or drivers head out of the region or to the U.S. to buy cheaper fuel.

How it would work here remains to be seen, but mayors expect it would likely be a hybrid model based on systems in place in Singapore, London and Stockholm. Officials are also watching a pilot project in Oregon, set to start July 1, in which 5,000 drivers will be charged 1.5 cents per mile driven. The intent

is to provide volunteers with a credit to offset the fuel tax they pay at the pump, but they may end up paying more depending on how much they drive per month and the average miles per gallon of their vehicle.

"It would have to be a made-in-Vancouver model here and likely related to distance, using bridges and tunnels as tolling points," said North Vancouver District Mayor Richard Walton. "You can't just use bridges because that penalizes people going east-west and not north-south."

Congestion pricing, which is used in London and Stockholm, could work in downtown Vancouver but wouldn't be effective across the region, Walton said. Such a model draws a circle around the downtown core, charging a fee every time a driver crosses through, but this means a driver could get from West Vancouver to Surrey without having to pay anything.

Singapore's model, which has electronic road tolling on major arteries with motorists charged per distance travelled during peak hours, is probably the most suitable, Walton said, but notes the problem here is that TransLink doesn't own all the roads and bridges across the region. This could pose issues for motorists as they pass through the different "gantries" that record entrances and exits.

The Port Mann Bridge and Massey Tunnel, for instance, are owned by the B.C. government, while TransLink has responsibility for the Pattullo, Knight and Golden Ears bridges and the city of Vancouver controls the Granville, Burrard and Cambie crossings. Various roads and highways are also shared among TransLink, municipalities and the province.

"The current governance structure has to change. You have to get all the assets in one bucket, look at the ownership of all roads and bridges," Walton said, adding: "It's a political hot potato. It's about tax room and not wanting to go into an election and take any political heat."

Todd Litman, of the Victoria Transport Policy Institute, agreed it could get tricky getting the province to support such a strategy, noting both the NDP and the Liberal governments have been hesitant to impose any restrictions on drivers across the region. Indeed, the province was quick to approve the new Port Mann and a new bridge for the Massey Tunnel, while insisting Metro Vancouver hold a plebiscite on any funding sources to increase transit across the region.

"That's the great tragedy," Littman said, noting the original intent of TransLink was to use "revenue-generating strategies" such as tolling all the bridges into downtown to raise funds. "For those of us who want to see congestion reduction, that makes a lot of sense," he said.

Litman noted charging drivers more to use roads and bridges during peak hours, as in Singapore, would reduce traffic congestion because some people would be compelled to take transit to save a few bucks, while others might drive at other times. This means some drivers may pay less or nothing at all.

"It's efficient and fair because it allows you to choose not to do it," Litman said. "Cities like Vancouver benefit from getting people to drive less because there's no more room (on the streets). Efficient road pricing, parking shifts and generating traffic lanes into bus lanes make sense ... buses should not be stuck in congestion."

Litman noted Metro Vancouver could use existing infrastructure, such as the Treo tolling decals that are used on the Port Mann Bridge, to help ease the costs of installing road pricing.

But it takes time — and money — to get such a system in place.

Manchester, England, rejected road pricing by one per cent in a referendum on the issue, while Litman noted New York City is balking at tolling the remainder of its untolled crossings, which means drivers go out of their way to avoid paying a toll.

Oregon, which is seen as the test case for road pricing in the U.S., held two pilot projects, in 2005 and

2012, before passing a bill in 2013 to authorize the voluntary program this summer in hopes of using it as a long-term alternate method to raise money for the state's highways.

About 1,200 drivers have already signed up for the program, according to Michelle Godfrey, spokeswoman for the Oregon Department of Transportation. Drivers can opt for a GPS in their vehicles to track their mileage, or a non-GPS tracker if they are concerned about their privacy.

Walton said he expects there would be issues with privacy laws here if people are using a GPS in a private vehicle.

But Gordon Price, of Simon Fraser University's City Program, said such technology is already here as people can be tracked anywhere, either in the new smart cars or just by their cellphones. "They know where you are, how far you're driving — they could do it tomorrow."


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They could - if one ignores all the privacy laws and force people to keep their GPS/Cell app on! - cjk