

Province resistant to Metro Vancouver road pricing policy

BY KELLY SINOSKI, VANCOUVER SUN FEBRUARY 14, 2014



The oldest and best known electronic road pricing scheme is Singapore's, which began in 1975 and became fully automated in 1998. Peak-hour pricing can be as high as the equivalent of \$2.50 Cdn to enter downtown at rush hour. Singapore estimates the system cuts road use by 15 per cent or more, and has increased travel speeds too.

The B.C. government is resisting a road pricing policy for Metro Vancouver, saying it wants to protect revenue collected from provincially owned roads and bridges.

But Transportation Minister Todd Stone hasn't completely closed the door on the issue, saying Friday that he is willing to discuss various funding sources with Metro mayors ahead of a referendum on transportation funding.

"I'm prepared to have discussions with them," Stone said Friday following a meeting with the mayors. "But we're going to be pretty protective of our general revenue from provincial assets."

Richard Walton, chairman of the mayors' council on transportation, said while it would be impossible to have a road-pricing strategy without using provincial infrastructure, such a move would take years to put in place anyway.

"It's very difficult coming up with road pricing unless you include some provincially owned freeways and bridges," he said. "Most of the bridges are owned by the province."

Walton maintains the referendum question would focus on short-term funding, and something like the controversial vehicle levy may be pitched because it would be the quickest way to get money for transit expansion.

The vehicle levy, which is already enshrined in provincial legislation, would allow mayors to put more desperately needed buses on the roads and reduce the pass-ups seen daily in places like the Broadway corridor. Surrey Mayor Dianne Watts suggested the regional carbon tax could also be a potential funding source.

The mayors have until June 30 to come up with a transportation plan, as well as potential funding options to pay for it, if a referendum is held next year.

Watts maintains the transportation plan, along with the potential funding sources, have already been worked out and it's a matter of pulling it all together.

The province has said any funding source must be affordable, regionally sourced and not negatively affect the environment.

"This is an opportunity to really move forward," she said. "We've been stuck in a logjam for far too long."

Both Walton and Watts say they will continue pursue a long-term comprehensive road pricing scheme, which is being used around the world and could see tolls on roads and bridges, fees charged per distance travelled or charges at peak hours to reduce congestion.

"If you can reduce traffic by 10 per cent, the congestion goes away," Walton said. "You're using it as a tool to spread people's travel patterns around. It's not a matter of taxing people out of their cars."

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