

## OPINION

## It's time to talk about congestion pricing

**Incentives required:** Bigger roads, more public transport alone won't solve Metro Vancouver's traffic woes



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In the past year, public debate in Metro Vancouver has focused on how to pay for new transportation capacity. But there is a missing piece in this mobility puzzle. We won't solve the problem of traffic congestion without also changing the underlying incentives. We need a serious discussion about congestion pricing.

This summer's transit referendum was about how to pay for new transit investments. Its failure doesn't signal that people are happy being stuck in traffic nor does it signal that we are using our current infrastructure efficiently. There are several things that pretty much everyone agrees with regarding transportation in Metro Vancouver. First, time lost in traffic costs people and businesses at least \$1.4 billion

per year. Second, better public-transit options are necessary, as are maintenance, repairs and upgrading of existing roads and bridges. Third, those transportation investments will have to be made.

Another point of agreement is that traffic congestion is getting worse. Given that Metro Vancouver's population is projected to grow by about a million people over the next 25 years, one can imagine how bad things could get. As population and port activities increase, container truck traffic will also grow. Who pays for the time that trucks spend idling on backed-up highways and arterial roads? These time delays raise costs for businesses and increase prices for consumers.

How to find a less-congested path forward? As decision-makers across the region regroup, there is an opportunity to introduce the idea of incentives into the conversation — the piece that's been missing all along.

It may seem like the answer is to build bigger roads and more public transport. But experience



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**Congestion pricing works because it will encourage some drivers to adjust when and where they drive.**

from cities around the world shows that this doesn't work. More and bigger highways reduce congestion for a while but then more drivers are encouraged onto roads and traffic congestion returns.

More public transit can create a similar effect. This is not to say that better roads and transit systems aren't valuable, but we must address the incentives regarding which roads to drive on and when.

Congestion is really about which roads drivers are on and when they want to be

there. Reducing traffic congestion requires not only providing people with alternatives to driving, but giving them incentives to shift their road-use patterns. Congestion pricing works because it creates these incentives.

By charging more to drive in traffic hot spots at peak times, congestion pricing encourages individuals to adjust how they commute. Some people who can avoid driving in hot spots at peak times will do so. People with less flexibility use the road and pay the fee, but in return they get a

faster and easier commute or business journey. The ultimate profit of a congestion charge is in people's time. In practice, they may save money too. The funds generated from the policy can provide additional benefits — for example, by investing in public transit, road repairs, or reducing taxes.

How do we start moving this solution forward? We need to observe how congestion pricing can work in conjunction with expanding transportation options. That research needs to go beyond theory and into gathering evidence with pilot projects so decision-makers — and commuters — can determine if a pricing approach makes sense for this region and how best it might be designed.

B.C. and Metro Vancouver have never been afraid to lead Canada in innovative solutions to 21st century challenges. Urban traffic congestion is a symptom of our time and it's not going away. We have everything to gain, and little to lose, by putting pricing to the test.

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