

OPINION

It's time to check out road tolling

Pilot project:
Vancouver should see how variable time fees affect gridlock before building a costly new bridge



The case for road pricing — in Vancouver this would probably mean a comprehensive system of tolls that go up or down depending on traffic volume — is clear.

What remains muddy, however, is how to overcome a unique obstacle preventing implementation of this sensible solution to Metro Vancouver's traffic woes.

This obstacle is Premier Christy Clark and her turf war with municipal leaders. Clark holds the hammer in terms of legislative authority and control over revenue, and she uses it to insist — despite counter-productive examples of plebiscites on both the HST and TransLink funding — on holding another vote if/

when the region decides it wants to use tolling as a tool to rein in congestion.

Back in 2013 in an interview for my series on direct democracy, Clark opined that referendums ought to be used sparingly, and only on the right kinds of issues. She cited a couple of "right" scenarios for giving citizens a say — choosing a date (early February) for her new Family Day holiday, and former premier Gordon Campbell's bizarre referendum of 2002 on First Nations issues, which produced a result that defied the Charter of Rights and was totally ignored by his government.

But how Clark's own government collects and spends money? On this, the voice of

the people matters to her not so much — leaving her free to, among other things, unilaterally decide to spend \$3 billion or so to replace the congested Massey Tunnel south of Vancouver with a bridge that may or may not be tolled.

Still, she has no qualms about hobbling municipal leaders by imposing a vote that, history suggests, will be influenced more by strident populism than thoughtful analysis.

The case for road pricing has been made many times, never more convincingly than in a study by a high-profile think-tank, the Ecofiscal Commission, that was reported in Monday's Vancouver Sun. It looks at some places where various aspects and approaches have been tried — Ontario's experience with the world's first electronic toll highway, Minnesota's fast lanes for drivers who pay a voluntary toll rather than those with passengers, Stockholm's variable tolls for entering different sections of the city, Oregon's fees based on distance travelled on busy roads, or San Francisco's and Calgary's dynamic parking fees that are designed to help reduce congestion. And there are many other successful examples it could have drawn on.

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The study contains some Vancouver-specific solutions. It argues that zone pricing could work well here simply by applying variable tolls to the bridges and tunnels that link municipalities and/or neighbourhoods. It also thinks distance-based pricing might be an option in the future, but not any time soon.

Of course, comprehensive, variable tolling for the region was proposed almost five years ago by a senior group from the Ministry of Transport, TransLink and the cities of Vancouver and Surrey. The regional mayors, who have weak powers to oversee some aspects of TransLink, have renewed this call from time to time.

But Clark keeps saying No — or she sets the bar so high that any proposal is near-certain to fail.

The Ecofiscal report avoids

pointed comments about Clark or other politicians. But, interestingly, it does contain a recommendation that could lead to a workable compromise between her control-freak tendencies and the need to let local policy-makers actually make policy.

It's for the federal government to support, and local governments to implement, a variable tolling system as a time-limited pilot project to see how it works. (The standard to be met, says Ecofiscal chairman Chris Ragan, should be whether people get to and from work faster.) That's what happened in Stockholm and, after seven months of seeing good results, citizens voted to retain it.

I don't suppose Swedes like paying to drive any more than Canadians would. But they do like getting to work on time and getting home at a reasonable hour. I'm sure we would endorse the system, too, if we knew it would work. And if, not incidentally, it would also mean saving a bundle on things like trucks and workers tied up in traffic, as well as in future taxes when it turns out we don't need as many hugely costly projects like Clark's new bridge.

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