

**Does it Pay to Drive Downtown?  
The Benefits of Implementing a Downtown Toll System in Toronto**

By Art Lightstone,  
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Air pollution in Toronto comes from a great many sources, including traffic, industry, residences, businesses, and rail, air, and marine vehicles. Of all these sources, however, traffic has the greatest impact on health, contributing to about 280 premature deaths and 1,090 hospitalizations each year (Toronto Public Health, 2014). Major cities throughout the world, including London, Milan, and Stockholm, have begun implementing city-core toll systems, yet Toronto, a world-class city with world-class traffic congestion, has not taken these same steps. Toronto should implement a downtown toll system because it would raise much needed tax revenue for public transit, reduce the costs of traffic congestion, and reduce carbon emissions in the highly populated downtown area.

In 2013, the Toronto Board of Trade issued a report suggesting that the implementation of a \$0.10 per km toll system in Toronto's downtown core could raise between \$1.3 billion to 1.5 billion for the city each year ("A Green Light," p. 26). To be sure, London, England has been implementing a downtown toll system for a decade now, and their experience has been very positive. Ken Livingstone, London's mayor in 2003 when the city's toll system was launched, looks back at the project with much pride. Livingstone believes it was one of the most successful decisions he made during his administration. In fact, he told BBC News reporter Claire Timms that the entire plan "turned out better than I expected" (Timms, 2013). Financially, London's cordon toll system has raised a great deal of tax revenue for London, starting from the very first day wherein £5 from 57,000 drivers (Timms, 2013). That represents a net tax inflow of £285,000.00 each and every day for the city of London. Without a doubt, Toronto could certainly benefit from the economic boon that a downtown toll system could provide to the city's annual budget.

According to Toronto Board of Trade's Green Light Report, Torontonians spend, on average, two hours a day commuting to work, which amounts to 40 days a year of wasted time ("Green Light," 2013, p. 11). Moreover, the time lost to commuting actually costs the city

an estimated \$6 billion annually (“Green Light,” 2013, p. 15). The report states in no uncertain terms that traffic congestion comes at a great cost to both Toronto and the surrounding region. “Study after study, report after report, consistently identify our Region’s fraying transportation networks as the Achilles heel of the Toronto Region economy” (“Green Light,” 2013, p. 15). Driving home the same point, the Organization for Co-operation and Development (OECD), cited the Toronto region’s sub-par transportation infrastructure as “the leading drag on global competitiveness” (“Green Light,” 2013, p. 15). Yet more evidence of the incredible cost of Toronto’s traffic congestion is found in a 2011 study produced by the McMaster Institute for Transportation and Logistics. This study not only highlighted the economic importance of the movement of goods through the Greater Golden Horseshoe Region, but it also calculated the costs of congestion in the region. The report presented a serious indictment of the GGH regional transportation network, providing Toronto with a transportation rating that rivalled even the world’s worst cities:

The biggest challenge to the movement of goods in the GGH is regional congestion. Recent analysis by the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development rates the Toronto region the second worst for commute times among all metropolitan regions in the OECD, behind only Budapest, Hungary (Higgins, p. 16, 2011).

The McMaster report outlined two distinct costs associated with traffic congestion in the Toronto area. There is the personal cost of congestion to commuters, estimated at \$3.3 billion per year, and there is the overall cost of lost productivity, estimated at \$2.7 billion annually (Higgins, p. 16, 2011). Without a doubt, Toronto, the Greater Horseshoe Region, and the entire province of Ontario would all benefit from the reduced costs of congestion that a Toronto toll system could provide.

While there can be little doubt that traffic congestion in the Toronto area is a very real and costly phenomenon, one might question whether a downtown toll system would actually deter drivers from entering the core city area, or merely add insult to injury by slapping an extra tax on an already frustrated group of commuters. However, evidence from the city of Stockholm, Sweden suggests that downtown tolls can be quite effective at reducing

congestion. Sweden ran a downtown toll trial from January 3 to July 31, of 2006, and the results were very encouraging. “Traffic traversing the cordon fell by 22 percent, travel times during the morning peak dropped by nearly a third,” and “injury accidents fell by 5 to 10 percent” (Lindsey, 2007, p. 12).

Traffic congestion invariably leads to more than just slow, aggravating commutes. We must also consider the highly concentrated pollution that is invariably produced by the relentless flow of idling motor vehicles meandering through Toronto’s downtown core. According to a study by the Toronto Board of Health, the pollution generated from road traffic in Toronto can be associated with hundreds of deaths each year, and over \$2.2 billion in mortality-related costs (Toronto Public Health, 2007, p. ii). In fact, a mere “30% reduction in vehicle emissions in Toronto is projected to save 189 lives and result in 900 million dollars in health benefits” (Toronto Public Health, 2007, p. ii). According to Dr. Monica Campbell, director of Healthy Public Policy at Toronto Public Health, “The biggest health risk from pollution in Toronto is vehicles” (Ligeti, 2014). A 2014 analysis by Toronto Public Health, suggests that traffic pollution is responsible for approximately 280 of 1,300 premature deaths in Toronto every year. The report also suggests that living within 300 to 500 meters of a major roadway can impact one’s health (Toronto Public Health, 2014, p. 2). More disturbing is the fact that one in four Canadians live in such circumstances, and a significant number of those individuals live in Toronto (Ligeti, 2014).

While the pollution from road traffic is undeniable, one might still question whether a downtown toll system could affect significant change on the issue. Yet again, we find compelling evidence from Stockholm’s 2006 trial. During that seven-month trial, “emissions fell by 10 to 14 percent, and public transport usage rose by 6 percent” (Lindsey, 2007, p. 12). To be sure, the reduction in traffic congestion that could be achieved by way of a downtown toll system in Toronto could indeed make a positive impact on a serious health issue affecting thousands of people every single day of the year.

The potential benefits of a downtown toll system in Toronto definitely suggest that the idea should be given serious consideration. A toll system implemented in Toronto's city core has the potential to raise significant tax revenues that could be used to support the city's public transportation system, reduce significant costs to both commuters and to the economy, and mitigate the impact of harmful carbon emissions that arise from traffic congestion.

Downtown tolls in Toronto is quite simply an idea whose time has come. As Dr. Harry Kitchen, professor of economics at Trent University, says, "It's going to come. It has to come"

(Poplewell, 2011).

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