

Bill Rea ? Need to sell me on toll lanes

Last week's provincial budget had some good points, several that were bad and some that sort of grew on me as time progressed. I'm not a big fan of deficits, and believe that they are something to be avoided, used sparingly and discharged as soon as possible. Businesses have to do that or they're soon out of business. Families and individuals have to do it or they soon find themselves in big trouble. I don't think I'm out of line expecting the same from the people who collect and spend my tax money.

But it was the idea of the high-occupancy toll (HOT) lanes on the major highways that got me to doing the most thinking. I was opposed at first, and although I might be hedging a bit on that now, I still believe I am going to be hard sell.

For one thing, I'm curious how it's all going to work.

I know high-occupancy vehicle (HOV) lanes have been in use for some time. I don't drive every 400 highway in the GTA, but I have noticed them on Highways 403 and 404, and they seem to work well.

Most of the driving I do on such roads is work-related, meaning I'm usually on my own when I use them. Since I'm the only person in the car, I'm not supposed to drive in these lanes. It sometimes causes a bit of tightening in my stomach muscles because, like most people, I don't like restrictions being imposed on me. On the other hand, I understand the logic behind HOV lanes and they seem to have accomplished the purpose for which they were established. I may not like being bossed around, but I am a fan of good traffic movement.

Interestingly, when I do have a passenger, I have trouble getting myself to use these lanes. It's sort of a mindset telling me I'm not allowed that causes me to hesitate.

But now we hear of this idea of allowing solo travellers like my good self to use these lanes, provided I'm willing to pay a toll.

I have to wonder how they are going to work it.

I've heard some talk that it's going to be on an honour system. If that very notion makes you laugh, then you're in good company. I can see them trying that at first, but it might last a couple of months at best, once the authorities realize the HOT lanes are jammed and no money's coming in.

Are people going to have to start carrying transponders that will activate monitoring devices in these lanes, so it can be recorded if one is alone in a given car? George Orwell would have loved that idea, and I can guarantee you most, if not all, in our society would not.

Like many of you, I have a transponder to drive Highway 407. I tolerate it because it only keeps tabs on me when I'm on a particular road, and since I and I alone decide on when I use it, it's not too onerous.

I guess they could rig cameras to photograph cars using HOT lanes, and employ that method to count the number of people in cars. Could such cameras work through tinted glass?

By the way, there are some who would argue such cameras constitute an invasion of privacy. I don't go along with that line of thinking myself (if I'm out in public, I figure who I'm with is in the public domain too). But that was one of many silly arguments used to argue against the use of photo radar.

Making it all work is one of the problems I have with this idea. But if these concerns can be answered (and for all I know, they might be), then I would have to fall back on my philosophic arguments.

I'm not a big fan of toll roads, and by extension, I think you would have a hard time selling toll lanes to me.

The problem is I resent being charged to pay for something that my tax dollars have already paid for.

I have never liked the concept of the 407 being an electronic toll road. I do have a transponder in case I have cause to use the road (if you go on the highway without a transponder, you get dinged with an administration charge). There are times when the lack of traffic on the road makes it very appealing, especially if time is an issue (and when is time never an issue?). In fact, it's one 400-series highway that my wife has few objections to driving.

I was obliged to drive to Richmond Hill on a personal matter about a week ago, and the 407 shaved a lot of time off the trip. Earlier this year, work required me to make a trip to Ajax in the middle of afternoon rushhour. The toll road made the trip a breeze, albeit an annoyingly expensive breeze.

I make the payments, but I do so grudgingly.

I also resent the fact the 407 is not under public operation any more. It was leased by the Mike Harris government in an effort to make the Provincial books look better. Nothing wrong with the intent, but parting with capital, money-making assets to pay down some debt was dumb. I thought so then, and I still do.

I liken it to paying off your mortgage by selling your house.

If Harris and company had really wanted to financially help their constituency, they could have just lifted the tolls and treated the

road like another King's Highway.

And if they're really looking for a way to tax the motoring public, what's wrong with photo radar?

I think what really bothers me the most about all this is government is in favour of using modern technology to charge motorists for the perfectly legal act of driving a highway that was built with tax dollars, but they squawk at the thought of using similar technology to charge people for the illegal act of exceeding the speed limit.

There are those who opposed photo radar because they said it was a government cash grab. I agree. I had no problems with photo radar because the financial outlay by the motoring public was voluntary. I drove 400-series highways every day the program was in effect in the mid-1990s, and never paid a dime in fines. That's simply because I knew the program allowed for speeding within certain parameters, and I stayed within them.

If there are people who want to break the law, what's wrong with making them pay for it?

I do know why it was scrapped years ago. There are a lot of drivers who resented that photo radar made it hard for them to get away with speeding and Harris was enough of an opportunist to see the vote potential in them.

Maybe it's time to see the money potential in them too

