

# FOR WHOM THE CAR TOLLS



RICHARD BERCUSON

**O**n the issue of toll roads in Ottawa, I am of two minds, a state many have told me is unlikely even at the best of times.

Other cities have tolls or are considering them. You pay to drive onto Manhattan. It all ways seemed to me to make more sense to just add a surcharge to every bagel or slice of New-York-style cheesecake and have the 65 million Manhattan eateries remit the fees to the city.

Besides, tolls don't appear to

have alleviated traffic much on Manhattan. Driving is still a rite of passage and a thrill-seeker's nirvana. Remember, too, this is a place with an efficient, though creaky, subway, thousands of taxis and wonderful walkable blocks.

You could argue that, without tolls, the traffic would be more of a nightmare. However, this would be a specious argument. I say this only because I happen to like the word "specious."

London charges nearly \$8 a day for driving into town during prime time. London, I'm told, is moderately larger and suffers from slightly more gridlock than Ottawa. It also has a subway used by millions daily.

San Francisco is researching tolls due to its downtown madness. A member of the city's Board of Supervisors suggest-

ed the top 20 cities in the U.S. would soon follow London's model.

The argument in favour of tolls into, say, the Glebe is that they are a means of reducing traffic in an already congested area. True, they are a means. True, it is a congested area, but not much of one.

A similar suggestion's been made to add tolls to bridges across the Ottawa River.

There's merit in both. Somewhere, Maybe. Indeed, tolls would be profitable for the city. Apart from income, they'd provide employment for those who haven't made the cut at the call centres sprouting up in the region.

Toll booths might afford new architects a chance to tinker with radical designs. Think trapezoidal- or tetrahedron-shaped booths.

We could take advantage of our region's high-tech expertise. Imagine buying a Tims coffee and paying an extra 50 cents for the new Swipe Cup.

Drive up to the toll booth, pass the cup in front of the sensor and off you go.

On special occasions, such as when a new mayor is elected or city bylaw officers pass their sensitivity training courses, the toll booths could close. Everyone would be happy and appreciative of City Hall's magnanimity. I'm sure they'd love to know we like them.

However, being a practical fellow, I can't get a handle on the logistics of toll booths, particularly around the Glebe.

When it was first suggested, I had an uneasy feeling it came as a threat.

"Either you walk into the

Glebe or we're going to charge you for driving."

Of course, tolls have never been suggested during the Great Glebe Garage Sale, when the streets are crammed so tight with vehicles that opening a car door is an act of aggression. But let's face economic facts: people can't cart off their new old treasures without some means of transportation. I'm waiting for the day a clever entrepreneur sells used shopping carts.

When there's an event at Lansdowne Park, the Civic Centre or Frank Clair Stadium (I'm hesitant to mention an actual football game), Gleblites are quite happy, thank you, to charge you up to \$25 to park on their driveways or lawns.

Both would be gone if there were tolls. No customers.

The innovative architecture used on bridge booths would be criticized as being out of character. Who wants a toll booth on their street anyway?

And you certainly couldn't use a Tims Swipe Cup. As far as we know, Tims isn't fair-trade coffee.

There's also the not-so-trivial issue of where to put toll booths in the Glebe, since it has innumerable entry points.

It is perhaps a noble, civic-minded (and even a little bit greedy) concept to charge people to drive into an area to reduce pollution and traffic.

Why not treat the problem the way we treat our dogs, by rewarding the good and ignoring the bad? When my pooch Toby pukes on the carpet, I don't "fine" him; I wait till he does something good, like puking in the kitchen, and I reward him for making good life choices.

The flip side to the negativity of tolls, therefore, is to offer a positive, practical alternative.

More parking lots.

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