

Minister inches towards regional road tolls

Nagel, Jeff . The Leader ; Surrey, B.C. [Surrey, B.C]. 22 June 2007: 5.

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

"Before I say to people south of the Fraser or in the northeast sector that we're going to start penalizing you by having you pay a congestion fee for trying to get to their jobs, I want to be able to at least look them in the eye and say 'You've actually got realistic, viable alternatives that you're not utilizing,'" [Kevin Falcon] told The Leader. It's the first sign of a possible shift from the minister's firm stance against regional tolling because it violates the government's policy of only tolling new or upgraded routes and only if there's a viable untolled alternative. "It's like a tolling situation where they pay extra to be able to have the opportunity to drive in those lanes," he said. "You pay a premium for a green licence plate that allows certain benefits to be associated with it."

FULL TEXT

Transportation minister Kevin Falcon now says he may eventually consider making drivers pay to use existing roads through road pricing - but only after a much expanded public transit system is in place.

"Before I say to people south of the Fraser or in the northeast sector that we're going to start penalizing you by having you pay a congestion fee for trying to get to their jobs, I want to be able to at least look them in the eye and say 'You've actually got realistic, viable alternatives that you're not utilizing,'" Falcon told The Leader.

He stressed he doesn't see it as a short- or medium-term answer to traffic woes, but said it could be considered after new transit lines are built to the northeast sector and across the Port Mann Bridge and up the Fraser Valley.

"Then I believe we have the ability to say we've now got this range of public transit options out there, therefore we can now take a hard look at things like congestion tolling."

It's the first sign of a possible shift from the minister's firm stance against regional tolling because it violates the government's policy of only tolling new or upgraded routes and only if there's a viable untolled alternative.

He spoke after the B.C. Chamber of Commerce called for the province to reconsider its policy and allow road pricing, which the GVRD has also begun studying.

Tolls can help control peak traffic use, encouraging motorists to drive at off-peak hours when it's cheaper or free, or to take transit or car pool.

It doesn't make any sense to pursue the idea now, Falcon maintained, but he does want to go to London to see first hand how a congestion charge works there, often raised as a model for other areas.

He said it's not likely a good fit here, since London's charge covers 30 square kilometres, a tiny area compared to the 1,000 square kilometres of land on the Burrard Peninsula.

Critics say Victoria's current policy means tolls will come one bridge at a time - starting with the new Golden Ears Bridge and then the twinned Port Mann - without any coherent strategy.

They also say it threatens to warp traffic patterns as motorists seek untolled bridges, including the dangerously narrow Pattullo.

Falcon also confirmed the province will examine the idea of selling drivers "green licence plates" that would let them use HOV lanes even when they're not carrying enough passengers.

"It's like a tolling situation where they pay extra to be able to have the opportunity to drive in those lanes," he said. "You pay a premium for a green licence plate that allows certain benefits to be associated with it."

It would be a variation of High Occupancy/Tolled (HOT) lanes in use in parts of California - sometimes dubbed Lexus lanes - where single motorists who pay a toll can join HOV traffic and bypass congested lanes.

Advocates claim HOT lanes make more efficient use of often-underused HOV lanes, reducing congestion and emissions from idling.

TransLink officials last year suggested it merits study, but until now Falcon had shunned the idea, fearing it would erode the advantage HOV lanes offer those willing to car pool or take transit.

"That was my personal opinion not yet backed up by any real research," he said. "I didn't like the idea of people, just because someone had extra money, being able to skirt around other cars."

In recent weeks the premier has spoken of green licence plates as a promising possibility and Falcon said his staff are now researching what impact they'd have on HOV lanes.

"We are going to be looking at all those kinds of options in our determination to ensure we meet our goal of reducing greenhouse gases by 33 per cent by 2020," Falcon said.

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DETAILS

People:	Falcon, Kevin
Publication title:	The Leader; Surrey, B.C.
Pages:	5
Number of pages:	0
Publication year:	2007
Publication date:	Jun 22, 2007
Section:	News
Publisher:	Torstar Syndication Services, a Division of Toronto Star Newspapers Limited
Place of publication:	Surrey, B.C.
Country of publication:	Canada, Surrey, B.C.
Publication subject:	General Interest Periodicals--Canada
ISSN:	14907526
Source type:	Newspaper
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	News
ProQuest document ID:	373147374
Document URL:	https://ezproxy.llbc.leg.bc.ca/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/minister-inches-towards-regional-road-tolls/docview/373147374/se-2?accountid=25387

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Last updated: 2010-06-24

Database: Canadian Newsstream

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