

## What is OTAG's position on congestion charges for roads?

Submitted by Kevin O'Donnell on Thu, 2013/02/07 - 11:04am

The question I would like to ask OTAG is: what is Ottawa's revenue-per-passenger-mile for roads? I suspect it is a massively negative number.

My question comes out of [OTAG's response](#) to David Reevely's [first post](#) about an upcoming debate on Rogers cable (which I can't watch having cut the cable a long time ago). It is entirely appropriate to have a discussion about how we purchase public transit services. We know from garbage collection that having multiple vendors keeps everyone on their toes and negotiating in good faith. It's also possible to mix public and private operators.

But, a debate on lowering the costs of public transit isn't the same as discussing how to keep overall taxes as low as possible. For that, we need to widen the discussion to include congestion pricing on roads.

As a people we accept that public transit users should pay a fee everytime they get on a bus. We also agree cities should fund a large chunk of the costs from property taxes. Now it's time to take the next step and discuss doing the same for roads and cars.

If OTAG is at all consistent in its plea for lower taxes, it should support road-pricing. The upcoming widening of the 174 beyond Blair is a good example, but so is the 417 and perhaps even some roads through the Greenbelt. Every taxpayer in Ottawa will pay for them whether they use them or not, yet the users of those roads will not be asked to pick up a share of the costs.

That's not the model we use for public transit. It's only inertia that keeps people expecting roads to be free. They are nothing of the sort, but the costs are buried in our property tax bill, so we just keep building more of them.

An OTAG sponsored debate that includes public transportation outsourcing, but also road pricing is one I'd watch.

I suspect that shifting 5% of transportation off of roads and onto public transit would save a bucket load more money than changing a few routes to private operators. But if we keep building free roads nobody has an incentive to change how they get to work, road budgets continue to grow, and infrastructure deficits accumulate beyond reason. OTAG's current debate is on private mini buses vs. OTranspo NewFlyers -- it's a debate about rounding errors on Ottawa's debt interest payments.

So OTAG, do you support shifting some road costs off of property taxes and onto the people who use them?



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### kevin macdonald

Kevin, I appreciate the chance to engage you on the issue of Transit. Your piece is very thorough in its thinking and is obviously part of the Transit debate going forward. In principle a road tax, or a road toll is not something that OTAG would ever consider supporting and the simple reason is that personal vehicle transport will still be the path of least resistance. Our upcoming program on Transit includes several different ideas on Transit, one of the topics covered, Jitneys, will best address some of the current short comings.

If bus transportation in bedroom communities is inconvenient and too costly people will just get in their car. If we agree that road congestion from the suburbs is a growing problem than the model of funding Transit for the suburbs deserves to be under the microscope. The funding model consists of two parts, half comes from transit ridership the other half from taxpayers. If we could somehow redistribute the funding model to include a privately run Jitney service, homeowners would better embrace public transit.

The business case for it is simple, if a private contractor can pick people up at their residences on demand and get them to LRT or transitway collection areas while utilizing the existing transit funding formula than it would make sense for those tempted to hop in their car. The temptation to drive to work turns to inconvenience. This service would be designed to complement existing Transit infrastructure and