

OPINION PIECE

YOU'RE GOING TO LOVE PAYING FOR ROADS THAT USED TO BE FREE – AND HERE'S WHY

By Liam Clarke, Bakwena commercial manager

Opponents of road tolling are certainly not stupid – we know that. Their arguments deserve serious consideration. But in the end, most concerns are self-serving in nature with few people willing to look at the greater good. I am convinced that should any person be able to look at the issue completely objectively – not from the viewpoint of how it would affect their personal wallet – then the benefits of tolling would be seen to swamp the potential costs.

There's a basic economic rule at play here: one that says when you give out something valuable — in this case, road space — for less than its true value, shortages result. This means that instead of paying with money, you may pay with the effort and time needed to acquire the good. In the case of roads, this rule materialises in the form of congestion, traffic gridlock and time spent in traffic. We all remember what driving (or crawling) on Gauteng's provincial freeways used to be like before urban toll roads were constructed.

For a parallel, think of Soviet shoppers spending their lives in endless queues to purchase artificially low-priced but exceedingly scarce goods.

Numbeo's 2016 Traffic Index shows that South Africa is the 5th most traffic congested country in the world. On average, it found South Africans spend 43 extra minutes in traffic due to traffic (going one way). During last year's EcoMobility World Festival and Transport Month, the economic impact that results from congestion in the whole of South Africa was estimated at over R1bn. There are 1.5 million vehicles just in Johannesburg, and at an average delay of 43 minutes each way, that's more than 675,000 hours lost every year – without even considering multiple passengers per vehicle.

With government struggling to meet even its current socio-economic obligations, how do we solve this growing burden on our nationwide transportation system and every individual who uses it? Government does not have sufficient funds to improve existing freeways in meaningful ways to reduce congestion. This is a problem common throughout the world - even more so in emerging countries which are experiencing rapid spikes in the number of vehicles on their roads. The solution being found in many countries is the use of toll roads.

To summarise: toll roads save commuters' time and money; reduce congestion and create safer driving environments; improve fuel efficiency and pollution; and support business growth.

I would like to amplify some of these specific arguments:

Toll roads are built at no cost to taxpayers - the concept of toll roads is to place the funding burden on users, rather than the over-used petrol levy. There is an argument that 'why should we pay to use roads that we've already paid for?' Many of our roads (as is the case around the world) are anything from 25 to 60 years old, at which point maintenance becomes a major cost, just as it does with older cars. So these roads are no longer 'paid for'.

- Free traffic flow - most toll roads employ technology that reduces delays and improves the free flow of traffic. For instance, instead of stopping to pay, drivers either pay with an electronic tag connected to a prepaid account or by having their license plate recorded and delivering monthly bills.
- Saving time and money – as seen in the above example, South Africans waste 7½ hours a week in traffic congestion. When drivers take the toll road option, they reduce their own wasted time as well as that of all traffic.
- Greater safety - toll roads can play an important role in alleviating congestion and accidents on the road.
- Toll roads reduce pollution and fuel consumption – this is achieved as toll roads reduce hours spent idling in gridlocked traffic and by enabling vehicles to move at more fuel efficient speeds.
- Benefits to businesses - using toll roads helps businesses save time and money by improving productivity and economic vitality, as a result of having their vehicles not sitting in traffic.

On the last point above, business has raised concerns in the past, in 2010 to be precise, regarding congestion on the Ben Schoeman highway between Johannesburg and Pretoria estimated the cost to business then at R15-million an hour.

Given national budgetary constraints and the ability of tolling to deliver much needed road infrastructure much quicker than the traditional way of funding roads from general taxation, the greater good of tolling is something we all should seriously take into consideration when debating road funding.