**SCMP Article**

**Reform tunnel tolls before city grinds to a halt**

Anyone travelling through the Cross-Harbour Tunnel – from Causeway Bay to Hung Hom – at peak hours knows it is terribly congested. A recent Transport Department study showed southbound traffic backed up as far as Mong Kok in the morning. In the evening rush hour, queues on Hong Kong side go as far as Exchange Square in Central.

These jams are about 3km long. The result is that a trip, taking maybe 10 minutes if the route were clear, takes more than 30 minutes. Meanwhile, the Western Harbour Tunnel, from Western to West Kowloon, has no queues and no delays.

Further north, in Kowloon, there is a similar discrepancy. The Lion Rock Tunnel linking Sha Tin to Wong Tai Sin has a 1.8km queue, on average, in the morning, taking up to 17 minutes to clear. The Route 8 tunnel, from Sha Tin to Cheung Sha Wan, has no queues or delays. Part of the problem is that the most popular tunnels are the most centrally located, and therefore most convenient for many commuters.

The problem is made worse by pricing. Logically, the links with the highest demand should have higher tolls than the others (or at least the same). Instead, the most popular, crowded tunnels are the cheapest. Even motorists who would have a quicker journey using the other tunnels use them.

At some point, this has to change. The whole tunnel system will be overloaded by 2021 unless the pricing structure changes.

The Transport Department’s toll rationalisation study is impressively detailed and examines traffic flows and pricing at all six cross-harbour and Kowloon tunnels. Not surprisingly, it calls for changes in the tolls. The report goes over assorted options – some of which have been proposed in the past. These include a variety of combinations of decreasing and increasing different tunnels’ tolls. They also include ideas like full electronic toll payment and even waiving all tolls.

The situation is complicated by the ownership structure of the tunnels. However, the report assumes that public subsidy of a franchisee would be feasible in principle. The recommendation is that tolls be adjusted so private cars and taxis have a greater incentive to use the less-crowded tunnels. This is about changing the relative charges – so, in theory, it could mean toll reductions rather than just increases. The key would be having a situation where it is cheaper to use the less-crowded options.

The report mentions some other possibilities, such as peak charging for rush hours, or different charges on Sundays. But the core guideline is to match toll adjustments with objective measurements, like journey times. The ideas still require consultation and legislative action.

The big question is: will politicians and the public accept them? Interest groups will create a huge fuss. However, the proposals will not affect tolls for buses or minibuses, or for vehicles transporting goods. Most of the travelling public will benefit from less congestion, even if certain interest groups oppose the changes. Judging by past attempts to sort out this problem, it will fail. Yet it can’t, because these key routes will otherwise face gridlock at some point. The tunnels are not the only choke points. They feed into areas where the roads and intersections approach full capacity. Road network expansion, like the opening of the Central-Wan Chai bypass in about a year’s time, can ease congestion in specific areas. So the traffic moves more quickly through that area – but where does it end up?

Look around most of our inner urban areas, and you will see more office, hotel and residential towers going up, replacing the smaller developments that were there previously. Each bigger tower means more cars, more trucks and more pedestrians. Yet, in most cases, the road and pavement space for the vehicles and people is fixed. This is not sustainable. The good news is that, even at peak times, our traffic mostly still flows (provided there isn’t an accident or some other blockage). Unlike some Southeast Asian cities, we have time to start managing traffic volume.

The response to the Transport Department’s proposals will show whether we as a community can face the challenge and do it.