

Peak time penalty may curb traffic

Farrah Tomazin

Motorists could be forced to pay more to use the roads during peak times in a bid to reduce traffic congestion, under a contentious proposal being examined by the state government's chief infrastructure adviser.

With figures showing that congestion costs about \$4.6 billion in Melbourne each year, Infrastructure Victoria is pushing for a rethink in the way transport is priced. It argues a new structure is needed to encourage more people to shift to public transport, car pool, or travel when it's less busy.

The idea for a transport network pricing review is one of dozens of options outlined in a 433-page report that will form the basis of a 30-year strategy to be handed to Premier Daniel Andrews at the end of the year.

On the table are a number of suggestions, including variable tolls based on demand (otherwise known as peakpricing); satellite-enabled tolling (which allows road users to be charged according to the distance travelled) or fixed tolls on particular roads (already used on a number of freeways throughout Melbourne).

"We want to talk about this option with the community in a broader sense – to help people understand that we all pay for transport services in some way, through fuel excises, registration, council rates, public transport fares and as taxpayers. The key question is whether what we pay ... helps us make decisions on what transport we use," the report says.

The idea of a new road pricing regime has gained momentum in recent years, with organisations such as the Committee for Economic Development, the RACV, and the Productivity Commission all pushing for a reform.

In Victoria, Transurban is undertaking a trial of road pricing involving 1200 volunteers and three different userpays models: a distance-based perkilometre charge; a one-off charge based on anticipated kilometres; and a price per trip charge or access charge.

But overhauling the system is likely to prove challenging for any government, with acting Victorian roads minister Jacinta Allan telling Fairfax Media: "The government has consistently ruled out road pricing and we have no plans to change that."

Infrastructure Victoria argues that while parts of the transport network already has user charges, these are not generally targeted at managing demand on our roads. The agency also points out that a new pricing structure would make it easier for people to get to work, lift productivity through more efficient freight, and improve the environment by encouraging people to car pool or shift to public transport.