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Highway 99 along the Sea-to-Sky Highway just south of Britannia Beach. A Toll proposal has sparked an outcry from people who live along the route.

So I'm doing the ferry traffic crawl listening to Rafe Mair raise his usual loquacious ruckus, this time over the proposal that a \$30-something toll be applied to the Sea-to-Sky Highway to defray costs of upgrading it for the Whistler Olympic bid.

"Dr. No" makes the predictable arguments. A toll would be unfair to folks like Rafe -- in all fairness, he declares his personal interest from the get go - - who live in beautiful Lions Bay but work in the concretescape of downtown Vancouver.

It would be unfair to people who live along the highway and have to drive Into Squamish or West Vancouver to buy gas or groceries. Why should somebody have to pay a highway toll to go and see the doctor or the dentist, for Pete's sake?

Now maybe it's the fumes from the traffic jam lowering my IQ but I'm thinking, wait a minute -- people like me who live on an island already pay a whacking great toll every time we want to drive on the highway system. It's called a ferry fare and I don't see any big protest out there against proposals that fares for Gulf Islanders be jacked up to recover costs.

In fact, it's the opposite. There's always an on-going clamour about the exorbitant cost of maintaining ferry service to places like Thetis Island, Gabriola, Quadra or Hornby.

The argument for charging back the full cost of operating a ferry as a Segment of the highway system to Mayne Islanders or Saturna Islanders holds that Since they choose to live out in the boondocks, why should some lower middle class family on the east side of Vancouver be subsidizing their choice of a lifestyle most people consider idyllic?

I guess to be fair you'd have to turn that same argument on folks who choose to live in Lions Bay, or Squamish, or Whistler. If they choose to live out in their beautiful, tranquil surroundings and commute to work in noisy Vancouver -- or Whistler, for that matter -- why should that iconic family in east of Vancouver be subsidizing their lifestyle choices?

But there's no alternate route to Vancouver, goes the counter-argument, so unlike the Coquihalla Highway where you can always drive Hell's Gate or down through the Tulameen to Princeton and over the Whipsaw Creek switchbacks to Hope, a toll on an upgraded Sea-to-Sky Highway would be unavoidable.

Well, the ferry fare from Mayne Island to either Vancouver Island or to the continent is certainly unavoidable -- unless you own a float plane or one of those big Zodiac inflatables with twin 50s on the back that's capable of cutting through any storm on the Strait of Georgia.

Indeed, the same thing applies to each of the 750,000 people who live on Vancouver Island. The weekday toll on the sea link portion of the highway system connecting the Island to Vancouver is now \$82 return at summer peak. Add the \$30 reservation fee that's essential for anybody trying to do business during the tourist season and the bill is \$112. So what's the big deal about a \$30-toll on an upgraded Sea-to-Sky Highway?

As a matter of fact, I agree with Rafe Mair on this issue. The toll is bad
And unjust.

A toll on the highway would amount to a selective surtax on taxes that every driver who wants to use the highway has already paid.

I don't know about you, but I think vengeful thoughts when the provincial government first gouges me with exorbitant taxes on gasoline, motor vehicle registration fees, licence fees and sales taxes on new vehicles, ostensibly to provide and maintain non-municipal roads, and then turns around and tells me that if I actually want to use the road I've already paid for, I have to pay again. And again. And again. And again.

No. No. No. And no, I say.

The reason we have a tax system in the first place is to distribute the cost burden of public services across the general population so that access is equitable. I don't think that somebody who lives in Atlin or Sunset Prairie should pay 10 times the fee for medical service or postal service as somebody who lives in the Lower Mainland just by virtue of geographic location.

I start with the premise that since we are all British Columbians and are All equal members of the provincial community, then we all deserve fair and Equal access to fundamental public services like health care, education and publicly-supported transportation infrastructures.

This is partly a function of sovereignty. It's extremely difficult to assert sovereignty over territory you don't occupy, which is why nations routinely subsidize services in regions that are remote from their major population centres. We want people to live in remote areas of rural B.C. because it's through their presence that we maintain our claim on that territory and its valuable resources.

True, this can work to the advantage of some people who use a particular service more than others. But across a whole array of services to vastly different regions and needs, the relationship between cost and users generally averages out.

We don't charge the people who live in Stewart or Salmo the total cost of building and maintaining a highway to their remote corner of the province for one reason -- we believe they complete us as a community and it's in the broader public good to have them integrated into B.C.'s political, economic and social life.

Frankly, I don't mind paying taxes so that kids in the Cariboo or the Peace River district can go to school on a safe, well-maintained school bus route.

And I don't mind paying a surcharge in the form of a ferry fare because Common sense tells me that staffing and operating a ferry system is not quite the Same as maintaining a bridge.

But I do get peeved when beady-eyed little neo-conservative zealots in the provincial government's inner councils dream up schemes to apply an additional user tax on public infrastructure that I've been paying taxes to support for nearly 40 years -- a time, incidentally in which I've never drawn a nickel of unemployment insurance or welfare.

So count me on the No side. No tolls on an upgraded Sea-to-Sky Highway. No tolls on a refurbished Lions Gate Bridge. No sky's-the-limit ferry fares without provincial subsidies for folks on Galiano or Mayne or Kuper Island. And while we're at it, let's yank that toll off the long-ago paid off Coquihalla Highway, too.