

Auto-toll success clears way for road pricing

By **Tonny Chan**

THE 10-year battle against electronic road pricing is all over bar the shouting — transport officials are planning to apply it to major toll routes in the war against traffic congestion.

Statistics show a growing band of motorists switching to auto-toll payment following a year of applying the system to two of Hong Kong's tunnels.

A spokesman for Autopass Company — still the only firm operating the service here — said about 35,000 vehicles had so far been equipped with the electronic signalling device.

This is more than triple the 11,000 vehicles which had the device last summer when auto-toll was introduced to the Cross Harbour Tunnel and Aberdeen Tunnel.

At the end of this month, Lion Rock Tunnel will become the third to be equipped with the device to automatically collect tolls.

The system would enable the company to tap the New Territories market, Autopass development manager Simon Tu said.

He said they had only recently

secured government agreement to convert manual booths at Lion Rock Tunnel to auto-toll booths.

With auto-toll, an electronic signalling device about the size of a matchbox is attached to a vehicle's windscreen.

The device interacts with an electronic sensor at the pay booths and records the toll automatically every time the vehicle passes the pay booth.

The toll is electronically deducted from the device's preset value.

Unlike the first electronic road pricing proposal of 10 years ago, which would keep records of motorists' movements, the toll is now paid without recording motorists' whereabouts.

Mr Tu said about 1,200 cars could pass through an auto-toll booth in an hour — more than double the capacity for booths manned by toll collectors.

Mr Tu confirmed that the company had also been discussing extending auto-toll to all toll tunnels but he would not comment further.

■ **Continued Page 2**

Electronic road-toll system expands

He said the government was giving the commercial sector complete freedom to develop the market, adding that its role was limited to the policy level.

Since auto-toll was introduced at the Cross-Harbour Tunnel and Aberdeen Tunnel last August, about 2,400 more vehicles had been equipped with the device each month, Mr Tu said.

"The steady growth shows motorists are more receptive to the concept than they were."

About one in five motorists

using the Cross-Harbour Tunnel now paid by auto-toll, compared with one in nine last summer when the auto-toll program started, he said.

Taxi operators and private motorists were the top auto-toll users, Mr Tu said, accounting for about 60 per cent of the business at the two tunnels while public-franchised buses accounted for about 20 per cent.

But other commercial vehicles had low auto-toll usage rates: public mini-buses had 2 per cent, light goods vehicles 10 per cent and coaches 5 per

cent. Heavy goods vehicles took up the rest, he said, but this could not be interpreted as meaning resistance to auto-toll.

"It depends on the pattern of their movements."

"If they do not use the two tunnels regularly, they wouldn't, naturally, enrol for auto-toll."

Auto-toll booths would be installed at Lion Rock Tunnel no later than the end of August and a publicity campaign was now being drawn up.