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## Answering fears of ERP scheme

YOUR article on electronic road pricing (May 9) referred to a paper written by Dr Peter Fong of HKU and reported his doubts about the value of a pilot test.

It was argued that the pilot scheme would not test how motorists would react by fair means or foul to paying a toll, and that the testing of the components could have been carried out in a laboratory.

Since Dr Fong's paper also recognised the advantages of electronic road pricing, I should like to respond to the doubts he mentioned.

First, no one could have been satisfied with a laboratory test as regards the investment required for an electronic road pricing system.

Bench tests, off road demonstrations and the use of the electronic equipment in other applications have already shown that individual vehicles can be identified through electronic number plate units and recorded.

What was needed as the next step was an exacting test of full scale equipment on public roads, and this is what is being done in the pilot scheme.

In this way, the equipment can be subjected to the vagaries of our climate, the passage of heavy vehicles, different gradients, and so on.

Admittedly this testing of the mechanics of the system will not in itself indicate the kinds of activities to which motorists might resort to try to evade road use charges.

It is rather a slur on Hongkong's motorists to imply that they would be more criminal and gifted with low cunning than motorists elsewhere in the world.

Hongkong motorists generally abide by and respect the traffic laws, and if



this were not so, there would be a very different picture of traffic flows, accident statistics, compliance with the fixed penalty system and use of unlicensed vehicles.

Nonetheless, the Administration clearly has to look at the "worse case", and in this regard at a special testing site the detection of vehicles without electronic number plates (ENPs), with shielded ENPs, with damaged ENPs and so on will be demonstrated, and the media would be invited to witness these demonstrations.

Of course in any operational system, there would have to be realistic deterrents against deliberate interference with an electronic number plate or related equipment.

It is odd that evasion of charges seems to be raised only in the context of electronic road pricing, and not with the MTR or car parks using magnetic tickets — a technology which is arguably simpler to duplicate than an electronic number plate.

The second main point is that it would be unrealistic to have a pilot scheme in which motorists were charged for entering Central.

Under the electronic road pricing system this would involve, inter alia, all vehicles entering Central occasionally, or regularly being fitted with an electronic number plate

— a very large undertaking for a pilot scheme.

It is not unusual in the transport field to be faced with a similar position and levels of use of planned roads, patronage on proposed public transport developments, etc cannot be determined by controlled experiments before an investment decision is made.

There is inevitably a reliance on mathematical models which produce forecasts by extrapolating from the existing situation and taking account of known developments and trends.

The same kind of modelling is presently under way for electronic road pricing, and indeed is quite a large and a vital component of the pilot scheme consultancy.

Incidentally, contrary to Dr Fong's suggestion, the forecast of the effects of electronic road pricing strategies will take account of the opening of the MTR Island Line and the Island Eastern Corridor.

To ensure that any assumptions for the model are as realistic as possible, in-depth interviews have been or are being carried out with samples of motorists in the territory.

This forecasting should provide a good indication of how motorists would adjust their behaviour in the light of the electronic road pricing charges by, for instance, switching mode of public

transport, adjusting the time of the journey, and using a different route.

On this point in a similar territory — Singapore — motorists were sensitive to road pricing. A Singapore Area Licensing System was introduced with a Singapore \$3 charge for entering the Central Business District in a defined peak period. This caused the number of private car trips during the period to fall by about 75 per cent.

Closer at hand the implementation of the Cross Harbour Tunnel Passage Tax would give a good indication of how motorists respond to changes in the price for using one of the important links in the road network.

In this way at the end of the pilot scheme, the Government will have not only a full assessment of the operation of the technical equipment, but also forecasts of the benefits of electronic road pricing to compare with the estimated costs of a full system.

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