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## Transportation group has plan to solve Chicago's gridlock – but it'll cost you

Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning proposes congestion-pricing to ease traffic snarls.

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(Flickr/Baratunde Thurston)

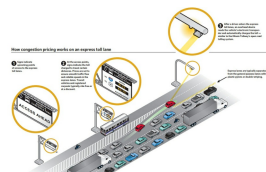
Has Chicago traffic gotten so bad, that paying for it is the only way to relieve the headache?

One group thinks so.

The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) unveiled a proposal on Monday that called for the implementation of additional lanes on the region's highways that they say would cut down on commute time – but at a cost.

Randy Blackenhorn, the executive director for CMAP, thinks that now is the prime opportunity to push this plan, which urban planners typically refer to as “congestion pricing,” where a premium is charged at peak traffic times for exclusive lanes.

### How it works



“The Chicago region needs to think about how they're going to manage their traffic for the next 20 years. What congestion pricing does is give people choice. It gives them an option about how to get their travel done more efficiently and more cost effectively,” he said.

The plan put forth by CMAP looks at five expressway projects.

Including two new facilities:

- The Illinois Route 53 north extension
- Illinois Route 120 bypass and the Elgin-O'Hare West Bypass

Plus new lanes on:

- I-90 Addams Tollway
- I-290 Eisenhower Expressway
- I-55 Stevenson Expressway

If implemented, CMAP says toll rates in the express lanes would rise at times when more drivers want to use the highway, and fall when demand is low. According to CMAP, computer modeling has shown the toll rates themselves can be adjusted according to demand so that all drivers can have faster commute, not just those in the express lanes.

CMAP says drivers in the general “non-express” lanes will benefit as some drivers shift to the premium lanes, easing their commute as well.

Congestion pricing is not a new concept. New York’s Mayor Michael Bloomberg sought to implement it in 2007, but was unable to get it approved at the state level.

In 2003, London introduced congestion pricing, which was credited with reducing traffic and increasing air quality, [but is not without its critics](#).

Economists and environmentalists [favor congestion pricing](#) because it incentivizes mass public transit and [imposes a fee to those who would cause the traffic](#). Further, many have said that increasing lanes only reduces traffic for a short period of time, before it increases as more drivers become accustomed to the added space.

In the U.S., cities from Miami to Seattle [have explored and are in the process of implementing](#) similar pricing tolls.

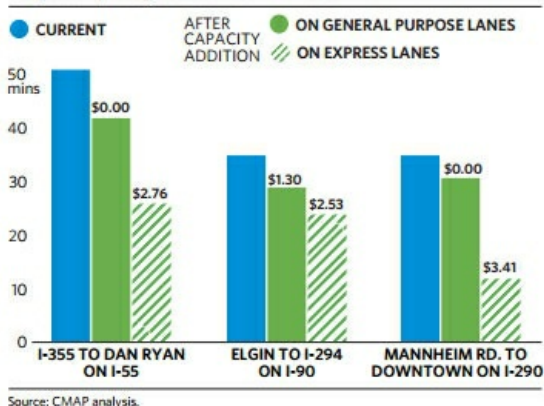
But can it work in Chicago?

CMAP seems to think so and is looking at the I-90 Addams Tollway as a launch pad. Construction of an additional lane is already due to begin next year, and CMAP hopes that this new lane will be turned into a congestion-priced one. Even at the planning stages, the I-90 Corridor Planning Council recommended congestion pricing for the expansion.

CMAP acknowledges that they would have to sell the plan to officials and more importantly — the public. CMAP said that support for congestion pricing generally increases as the public becomes familiar with it, but stresses that a few drivers would actually use the lanes daily.

"If it's the difference between being in traffic and or paying a toll and having it open... I'm ok with the toll," said Linda Gfresser of Waukeegan, Ill.

Travel time savings from the addition of new lanes with congestion pricing, travel times in minutes



According to their research, most would use the lanes two – three times a week. While the median household income is higher than the general purpose lanes, they would not create “Lexus lanes.” CMAP said that overall users of the lanes span all income classes, because their use would be decided on need, as drivers would be selective in using it as they run late for work or an appointment for example.

The Illinois Department of Transportation said they are willing to explore the idea of congestion pricing and that addressing traffic is the basis of a lot of construction projects, according to IDOT spokesman Josh Kaufman.

IDOT stressed that construction projects would have to involve the Illinois State Toll Highway Authority—and may require input from state and federal officials.

CMAP is actively pushing congestion pricing as part of its [GO TO 2040 plan](#), which calls for investments in infrastructure and transportation, which it says is vital to keep Chicago growing.

Regardless, many urban planners and politicians acknowledge that selling the public on a new toll is never easy.

"Five dollars a day times twenty days is a hundred dollars a month... I don't think so. No. I'll just leave earlier," said Patricia of South Holland, Ill.