

# THE CONNECTOR

## Putting our toolbox to work in a tough economy with congestion pricing



Congestion pricing lanes on I-35W



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October 25, 2012 [1 comment](#)

A recent New York Times [op-ed by Robert H. Frank](#) made me stop and think. In his article, Frank, economics professor at the Johnson Graduate School of Management at Cornell University, confronts the myth of “painful economic choices the nation is said to confront.” He argues that when it comes to infrastructure investment, the problem is not that we don’t have the financing tools to rebuild our crumbling system, it’s that we have been incapable of thinking about using these tools in new ways. This blog post stems from a sense of urgency about addressing the challenges that drag our region down.

Across the Chicagoland region, there’s clearly no lack of tools or creativity, but rather a lack of political will. Turf, fiefdoms, and an unwillingness to revisit decades-dated formulas and policies limit our thinking about funding the infrastructure we need. Economists strongly agree that substantial investment in infrastructure can stimulate an anemic economy, but we snipe across political parties and geography about funding these investments. For example, with broad consensus on the need for an O’Hare Western Bypass/Access, and financing sources identified for most of the \$4 billion price tag, we’re going to let the difficulties of determining the last \$300 million hold us back?

[In my last post](#) on the great potential of the World Business Chicago economic plan, I reflected on this nascent era of metro self-help. Smart cities and regions are planning proactively to build on existing assets and pursue nontraditional funding. This has become imperative at a time where cities and regions cannot fully rely on federal and state funding. At MPC, we promote innovative solutions through goal driven planning and coordinated, right-sized approaches. In 2010, we released “[The Road Less Traveled: Exploring Congestion Pricing in Chicagoland](#),” a report for the Illinois Tollway Authority that examined possibilities for congestion pricing on the Stevenson Expressway (I-55), Jane Adams Tollway (I-90), and Kennedy Expressway reversibles (I-90/94), including time saved for travelers, projected toll revenue, and impact on local roads and transit.

This report was among the first to explore [congestion pricing](#) as a new “tool” in the “toolkit” of innovative financing options. It’s a form of transportation demand management that can be used to rebalance traffic by offering drivers the option of paying a higher toll to drive in a less congested lane. That toll revenue is then invested back into road construction and

maintenance as well as increased transit options. If complemented with enhanced transit, pricing creates incentives for people to travel during less congested times, encourages the use of carpooling and transit, and reduces the enormous waste resulting from traffic congestion – more than a \$7 billion annual cost to our regional economy.

Our analysis showed that congestion priced lanes would significantly reduce travel times. For example, on the Jane Addams Tollway (I-90) between IL 31 and IL 53/I-290, travel time during morning rush hour in 2020 is projected to be a whopping 59 minutes on just this 12 mile stretch if no congestion priced lane is added. When travelers are given the choice of driving on congestion priced lanes or regularly tolled lanes however, that time drops to 12 minutes on a priced lane or 22.6 minutes on a regularly tolled lane.

This week, the [Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning \(CMAP\) took the pricing discussion to the next level with a new website](#), complete with infographics and interactive features. The website highlights why congestion pricing is an effective traffic management tool and is needed for faster, more reliable travel times. I am extremely encouraged that the Illinois Tollway has been looking at adding congestion pricing on the Jane Addams (I-90) as part of its reconstruction. Revenue generated from this lane can be invested in the rebuild, and can be used for other travel options, like adding transit along the corridor. MPC was thrilled to chair the Finance Committee of the [I-90 Corridor Planning Council](#), which recently examined these [possibilities](#).

Moreover, congestion pricing is a strategy increasingly accepted by the public. According to CMAP's new website, "Previous surveys in the Chicago region suggest that the public would accept congestion pricing. In an [Illinois Tollway survey](#) of its existing users, 54 percent said they would pay an extra toll if it would ensure congestion-free travel. In that same survey, 58 percent of individuals given information about express lanes were in favor of the Tollway building them." In regions like the Twin Cities that have implemented priced lanes, public support actually grew after people saw their impact.

The key to making congestion pricing work is providing options. Travelers need to be given the choice of how to get from point A to point B, be it in a regular unpriced lane, a free flowing priced lane, or public transit. Congestion pricing is a tool readily available to get people where they need to go faster and to implement transit and other overdue infrastructure projects. A tough economy is exactly the right time to surmount political roadblocks and put our toolbox to work.