



Congestion pricing could ease traffic woes.

Congestion

Chicago is the latest city to consider the idea.

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Drivers who value time over money might be intrigued by congestion pricing, a system in which drivers pay a charge to enter a city center at a certain time of day or to use special lanes on the highway.

Congestion pricing is just one strategy that metro areas can use to fight traffic.

So far the use of congestion pricing has been limited.



It's possible that congestion pricing might cut traffic.

London, Stockholm, Singapore, and Milan are the only major global cities to use zoned pricing, while 15 metro areas in 10 states use congestion-priced express lanes. Chicago is considering joining those ranks by charging a fee to drivers who want to use special express lanes on highways. The fee would be higher during peak hours and reduced at other times.

The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) is recommending the idea, as the Chicago area is considered to have the worst traffic in the country, according to a Texas A&M study. The CMAP is hoping to get the ball rolling in three or four years.

Many cities in America use toll roads and carpool lanes, but the theory behind congestion pricing is that when applied to city centers it will reduce traffic as drivers unwilling to pay the fees find other ways to get around and the revenue generated by the congestion charges will help pay for road repairs. When applied to highways, the theory goes, it will improve traffic flow, as some drivers choose to pay to use the fast lanes.

Officials we spoke to from CMAP said that for the Chicago area, revenue is not the goal—freer-flowing traffic is. One official told us that traffic flow is behind 90 percent of the rational for the idea.

"It does raise revenue, but not a tremendous amount," Jesse Elam, Senior Planner for CMAP, said.

There are criticisms. Those opposed to zoned congestion pricing in city centers say that it places an unfair burden on those with less means and hurts retail businesses in congestion zones by reducing their potential customer base as drivers choose to shop elsewhere. As for congestion pricing on highways, it's harder to see the downside, other than that drivers will need more cash to use the fast lanes.



Will drivers pay to avoid rush-hour traffic?

Zoned congestion pricing hasn't moved beyond places like London and Singapore, but as mentioned above, there are 15 cities in the U.S., mostly in coastal states, that use a model similar to what's being proposed in Chicago. The model has been around since 1995, when Orange County, California, became the first place in the nation to use it. CMAP's web site shows that 14 more congestion-pricing projects are under construction.

"People like them well enough to commit," Elam said.

As for us, we'd absolutely pony up a few extra bucks to get home from the office faster.