

A Closer Read

Sonali Basak — rising journalist, business and economics reporter and creative writer



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**\$7.3 billion yearly is lost from in time and fuel, says Metropolitan Planning Council...
but the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning has a solution.**



Interstate 90 during a morning commute.

The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning is gaining momentum with a congestion pricing campaign, soliciting media, elected officials and regional agencies to influence the locations and designs of congestion priced lanes.

Congestion pricing is a process that assigns tolls to certain highway lanes during rush hour to decrease traffic and reduce congestion, said Jesse Elam, senior planner at CMAP.

“The project sponsors need to know there is a high level of support out there for congestion pricing,” Elam said. “It’s isn’t just from a narrow strip of professional planners and transportation engineers.”

It would take a number of years for the project to take effect. CMAP is working with the Illinois Tollway Authority to design the first lanes to be constructed as early as 2016 on Interstate 90. The authority is already reconstructing a portion of the highway and CMAP is working to ensure congestion pricing is part of the overall plan.

“Some of these projects are ready to go very soon,” Elam said. “The time is now to be talking about this, to have the public conversation.”

Due to the extensive research behind congestion pricing, researchers are happy to see the policy makers confront the long-range planning and commitment necessary to improve congestion and regional mobility.

“I applaud them for the courage they have shown,” said Kazuya Kawamura, an associate professor of urban planning at University of Illinois at Chicago.

The campaign began in mid-October. Research for the project began in 2008. According to Elam, a decade is “nothing” in the long-term planning process of highways and the congestion pricing project is moving forward at a relatively fast pace.

Kawamura agrees. He said he was unsure if congestion pricing would ever happen, but it has been successfully developed California successfully, quicker than expected.

"I was in California in 1990s when congestion pricing was first proposed," Kawamura said. "When government wanted to introduce a pilot program in congestion pricing, no politician wanted to support it because it was political suicide."

Kawamura said congestion pricing is "basically considered driving tax" and is likely to face a lot of opposition. But CMAP has clearly outlined how congestion pricing has both immediate and long-term benefits for the regional economy.

Elam said the time saved from sitting in traffic will get people to work faster and get products from warehouses to selling floors much sooner, making the overall economy more productive. A CMAP Policy update last Wednesday estimated a gross regional product increase across seven counties by \$2 billion.

CMAP has been working with local business organizations and media outlets such as Business Chicago, the Illinois Department of Commerce and the Chicago Tribune. They have also been working with transportation sponsors such as the Illinois Tollway Authority, Illinois Department of Transportation, and the Metropolitan Planning Council.

Direct outreach with elected officials is a big part of the campaign, Elam said. There have been positive responses to their presentations, one of which was directed to the City Council's Committee on Pedestrian and Traffic Safety on Monday.

Mandy Burrell, communications associate at MPC, said the MPC also has conducted congestion pricing research for the past 4-5 years to help make the case for why congestion pricing would be good for the area, estimating \$7.3 billion lost yearly in time and money from congestion.

"Most people would be willing to pay for a more predictable commute," Burrell said.

But the process is extremely complicated to explain. "You're not going to have luck explaining it to people," Kawamura said. He said there needs to be a pilot program launched so people see how it works for themselves.

"It isn't in American culture for people to drive cheaply," Kawamura said. "Gas tax hasn't raised since 1990, it's the lowest in terms of digested dollars in history I think right now and no one is even willing to talk about gas taxes especially because the economy is in bad shape."

Income equity has been identified as one of the potential downsides to the project. A 2009 report by the RAND Corporation revealed income equity as an issue to congestion priced lanes in existing projects in Houston, Orange County, and San Diego. Elam said CMAP has done extensive research indicating that this is not likely to be the case and many kinds of people could take advantage of these lanes.

The initial projects in the Chicago area involve adding new lanes to existing highways. "Benefit overwhelmingly goes to the wealthy who values their time more than the normal population," Kawamura said.

To make things more even, Kawamura said money has to be re-invested into alternative transportation methods: replacement of antiquated equipment, increased routing, continuation of the Bus Rapid Transit system and maybe even discounted transit rates for low-income users. He said the congestino priced lanes could push more people to use public transit. CMAP's plan "Go to 2040" encompasses the idea of multimodal transportation and improved public transport along with congestion priced lanes.

Which explains CMAP's support for the current discussion within the tollway authority surrounding transit lanes to be built along I-90. The question is whether these lanes can also be used for congestion pricing. The design details of how lanes will be used are a major point of discussion, Elam said.

"If you think about it, you don't have to use it if you don't want to," Kawamura said. He said the people who use congestion priced lanes would free up some highway space even for those not using the priced lanes and transit could become more efficient. "People don't understand that argument."

Despite the initial cost of congestion pricing that Kawamura identified, Burrell said she thinks that people will continuously be more welcoming to the idea.

"I think they feel the cost of congestion mostly in their time and in the time that they lose sitting in traffic," Burrell said. "That's why I think people are willing to look at congestion pricing. Because time necessarily isn't money but goes beyond money."

"It's time you spend with your family or doing something you love versus time spent sitting in a traffic jam."