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To cut gridlock, drivers should pay for fast lane, new study says

'Congestion pricing' works elsewhere and is needed here, report says



Inbound traffic on the Kennedy creeps from Montrose Avenue toward the Loop. "The public understands that unpredictable traffic conditions make everyday driving like a game of roulette," said Joseph Schwieterman, an urban transportation expert at DePaul University. "Congestion pricing is about the only weapon we have." (Phil Velasquez, Chicago Tribune / July 9, 2010)

By Richard Wronski, Tribune reporter
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Graphic: Paying for the fast lane

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Worn down by a grinding commute from his home in Joliet to **John Marshall** Law School in downtown **Chicago**, aspiring attorney Mario Reed says he would gladly shell out a chunk of his future retainers for less congestion on the expressways.

"There's nothing more frustrating than dealing with traffic," says Reed, 28. "Whatever that cost would be, I would be happy to pay. It would make the quality of my life much better."

Already plagued by the nation's third-worst traffic congestion with little hope of building a way out of gridlock, Chicago-area motorists need to seriously consider whether they're willing to pay more to avoid traffic jams, transportation experts say.

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A new federally funded study by the **Metropolitan Planning Council** and the Illinois Tollway suggests that it's time for Chicago to embrace the concept known as "congestion pricing."

The strategy imposes the supply-and-demand model on traffic conditions. Expressway motorists pay a fee – or a premium toll – on the tollway — to use a particular lane or lanes during peak-demand periods. The fee would vary, depending on traffic — maybe about \$5.39 for Reed's commute on the inbound Stevenson — and lane usage would be "managed" to guarantee steady traffic flow.

"The public understands that unpredictable traffic conditions make everyday driving like a game of roulette," said Joseph Schwieteman, an urban transportation expert at **DePaul University**. "Congestion pricing is about the only weapon we have in our arsenal to encourage more efficient use of our expressways [and tollways]."

Proponents say the strategy creates incentives to travel during less-crowded times, encourages carpooling and transit use, and cuts wasted time and money from motorists stuck in traffic. Congestion-priced lanes also have been shown to improve traffic flow in adjacent lanes, backers say.

The tollway and the planning council applied for a federal grant in 2007 to fund the study of congestion pricing. The council supports the concept, while the tollway hasn't taken a position.

The study did not provide a timeline for how long it would take to implement such a plan in the Chicago area if it were approved.

After evaluating the tollways and expressways in the seven-county region, officials targeted three routes for the study: the Stevenson Expressway (Interstate 55) from I-355 to downtown Chicago; the **Jane Addams** Tollway (I-90) from I-290/Illinois Highway 53 to **Elgin**; and the reversible lanes on the Kennedy Expressway (I-90/94).

By converting the Kennedy's reversible lanes into congestion-priced lanes, the state would ask drivers to pay a variable toll depending on traffic and time of day, while being assured of free-flowing traffic, even in rush hour, according to the study.

"It's not a bad idea," said Steve Helpem, 66, a **Glencoe** resident who drives the Kennedy regularly to Lincoln Park. "If you pay extra, you'd get there faster. The question is, how much?"

Maybe about \$2.19 per inbound ride, the study suggests. That's just an estimate, however, based on models in other cities.

Similar express lanes and high-occupancy toll (HOT) lanes are the most common examples of congestion pricing in the United States, and are in use or being considered in 22 states.

In Minneapolis, where congestion pricing on the I-394 corridor was introduced in 2005, tolls are adjusted

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hourly based on the level of congestion. Drivers pay from \$1 to \$4 during rush hour.

On SR-91 Express Lanes in **Orange** County, Calif., tolls range from \$1.25 to \$10, depending on traffic. The average is \$3.13.

The HOT lane concept has already been a hot topic at the Illinois State Toll Highway Authority. In 2008, former **Gov. Rod Blagojevich** proposed the concept of high-occupancy "green lanes," but the plan was tainted by the "pay to play" scandal. Officials put the plan on hold after Blagojevich was ousted from office.

A 2007 report by the planning council estimated the Chicago region loses \$7.3 billion a year in wasted time, fuel and environmental damage. The report also found that Chicago-area drivers spend an average of 2 1/2 days stuck in traffic each year.

Truckers on the Illinois Tollway already use congestion pricing because they get a discount for traveling during off-peak hours.

Last year, Pace and the tollway teamed up in an unsuccessful bid for \$200 million in federal stimulus money to fund a plan to designate express bus and carpool lanes on the Tri-State Tollway.

Under the proposal, the inner lane in each direction would be intended for buses and carpools. Single-occupant motorists would be allowed to use the HOT lanes but would pay a premium toll, depending on the level of congestion.

In other cities, opponents have derided congestion pricing as "Lexus lanes" for well-to-do drivers.

But congestion pricing offers all drivers a choice, said Peter Skosey, a transportation expert at the planning council.

"In survey after survey, it's been shown that once these lanes are in place, people respond positively," Skosey said. "If they're in a hurry, they have the choice to [use them]. Surveys have also shown that users are not wealthy folks — it's a good mix of people. Folks of all means value their time."

The idea of imposing more tolls on area drivers will be a tough sell, some believe. Many still bristle at paying for an Illinois Tollway bureaucracy they consider self-perpetuating.

But DePaul's Schwieterman said, "Worsening financial problems have pushed our backs to a wall, so policymakers have an incentive to listen."

Experts say morning rush hour traffic is expected to increase by more than 12 percent over the next 20 years, and the region's economic competitiveness and quality of life are at risk unless innovative strategies are implemented.

In its draft comprehensive plan for the region, Go to 2040, the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning sounded the call for congestion pricing.

The strategy is vital because the region's highway system can't match population growth and because state and federal governments can't be relied on for enough money for new roads, said Randy Blankenhorn, the agency's executive director.

New revenue is needed to maintain and build expressways. The study suggests that congestion-pricing the Kennedy's reversible lanes could provide more than \$23 million a year.

"Is everyone going to be happy with paying more? No," Blankenhorn said. "But money isn't going to continue to drop down on us from Springfield and **Washington**. ... Infrastructure is not free. We want to make it fair and user-based. Users should pay for the system."

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Drive past congestion? It'll cost you

A new federally funded study lays out how congestion pricing could work on some of Chicagoland's most clogged expressways. The varying toll prices would give rush-hour drivers the option to buy their way past gridlock in a special lane. Congestion costs the region \$7.3 billion per year in fuel, environmental damage and wasted time. The concept is in practice in southern California and Minneapolis.



Figures are projected for 2020 during rush hour

90 JANE ADDAMS TOLLWAY

From Illinois 31 to the Tri-State Tollway (I-294)

IL-31 to I-290 I-290 to I-294

Inbound	Travel time (minutes)	TOTAL	Average speed (mph)	Projected fee for priced lane
Current system	59 10	69	12 57.6	
Priced lane	12 9	21	59 62	\$3.27
Toll lane	22.6 14	36.6	32 41	\$2.62
Outbound				
Current system	40 11	51	18 51	
Priced lane	13 11	24	57 55	\$2.06
Toll lane	15 16	31	48 37	\$2.91

90 94 KENNEDY EXPRESSWAY

From I-94 to Ohio Street

I-94 to California Avenue California Avenue to Ohio Street

Inbound	Travel time (minutes)	TOTAL	Average speed (mph)	Projected fee for priced lane
Current system	7 11	18	28.3 21.2	
Priced lane	4 5	9	53 44	\$1.05
Free lane	8 12	20	25.5 19	\$1.14
Outbound				
Current system	9 11	20	23.5 20	
Priced lane	4 4.5	8.5	55 51	\$1.05
Free lane	10 13	23	21.2 18	\$1.14

55 STEVENSON EXPRESSWAY

From I-355 to downtown Chicago

I-355 to I-294 I-294 to Cicero Avenue Cicero Avenue to I-90/94

Inbound	Travel time (minutes)	TOTAL	Average speed (mph)	Projected fee for priced lane
Current system	12 12 23	47	42 45 15	\$1.40
Priced lane	9 10 6	25	55 55 55	\$2.28
Free lane	10 11.6 9	30.6	48 47 38	\$1.71
Outbound				
Current system	11 12 14	37	43 47 24	\$1.65
Priced lane	9 10 6	25	55 55 55	\$1.37
Free lane	9.6 12 8	29.6	51 46 42	\$1.42

SOURCES: Illinois Tollway, Metropolitan Planning Council and Wilbur Smith Associates

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