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Paying for express lane one route to avoiding gridlock

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Daily Herald File Photo Gridlock costs commuters in terms of lost time and gas.

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By Marni Pyke

Paying to travel in an express lane could potentially save commuters from wasting time and gas idling their engines in traffic jams, experts say.

A Texas A&M Transportation Institute congestion study ranked Washington D.C. as worst among urban centers for gridlock while Chicago and its suburbs tied with Atlanta for seventh place.

A D V E R T I S E M E N T

The average Chicago area commuter lost 51 hours a year and bought 24 extra gallons of gas due to gridlock in 2011, researchers said in the report released Tuesday. That equates to \$1,153 a year.

Unfortunately, "as the economy turns around, congestion is only going to get worse," said Bill Eisele, a senior research engineer at Texas A&M University who co-authored the Urban Mobility Report. "Now it is time to act on fixing congestion as much as possible."

Researchers calculated that someone who spends 40 minutes driving to work in ideal

conditions takes 50 minutes for that same trip during peak travel times in the Chicago region.

Using public transit more or avoiding commuting in rush hour are solutions, but some planners also point to congestion pricing on new and existing highways as a cure. The concept allows drivers to use an express lane that guarantees faster travel in exchange for a fee or toll.

In its Go To 2040 report, the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning advocated new congestion-priced lanes on the Eisenhower and Stevenson expressways and Jane Addams Tollway as well as the proposed Route 53 extension into Lake County and the Elgin-O'Hare Expressway extension and western bypass, which is in the early stages of construction.

"One of the things that the (Texas A&M) report highlighted is how unreliable travel times are in the Chicago area," said CMAP project manager Jesse Elam. Researchers recommended multiplying travel minutes in perfect conditions by 3.95 to project how long rush hour trips here will take. Thus, a 20-minute drive at midnight would equal 70 minutes in rush hour.

Although charging for lanes guaranteeing a fast trip is a way to pay for new infrastructure when funding is in short supply, the public will have to be convinced it's worth it.

But congestion-priced lanes are gaining traction in Minneapolis, Orange County, Los Angeles and Atlanta, planners said. "The modest cost would be made up in reliability and knowing you'll get somewhere on time," Elam said.

Other findings in the report were that the region as a whole lost 271.7 million hours due to congestion in 2011 and consumed an extra 127 million gallons of gas. The cost of Chicago area congestion equates to \$6.2 billion a year, the report estimates.

For the first time, air pollution data was incorporated into the report. Researchers concluded that vehicles released 56 million pounds of greenhouse gases into the air during gridlock situations in cities across the country in 2011, which equates to "the liftoff weight of over 12,400 space shuttles with all fuel tanks full."

To learn more about the study, go to mobility.tamu.edu/ums/.