Traffic decongestant
Letting drivers pay to avoid delays

If you've ever been mired in a major traffic jam on a Chicago expressway—meaning, if you commuted during rush hour last week—you've probably daydreamed about ways to reach your destination. A helicopter? A jet pack? Teleportation? Then you've returned to the more plausible prospect that the prevalence of terrible traffic may get worse but will never get better.

That may seem inescapable. As the metropolitan population grows, the volume of cars on the roads increases as well. Providing mass transit doesn't seem to make much difference. Advertising the benefits of carpooling rarely works. Telecommuting turns out to be no big help.

Neither is the obvious option of building more highways. Expanded capacity may reduce travel times, but those in-duce more people to drive, which fills the new capacity until things are as bad as ever. Unless a few hundred thousand locals suddenly pack up and head for Texas, we appear to be stuck.

But maybe not. Transportation planners have long been attracted to an alternative that would charge drivers for the privilege of bypassing heavy traffic. It's called "congestion pricing," and it could be on the way here.

The idea is being floated by the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning as a way to pay for, and make the best use of, new lanes on six major Chicago-area roadways. These lanes would be "congestion-priced" in such a way as to assure that traffic would always flow at the posted speed limit of 55 mph.

In this scenario, a commuter would cut the drive on the Stevenson Expressway from 1-355 and the Dan Ryan in half—from 18 minutes (the current morning rush hour average) to 26 minutes. Eisenhower drivers would zip from Mannheim Road to Damen Avenue in 12 minutes, down from 35.

Skeptics will see this as an excuse to get even more drivers to use the expressways. But what it would actually achieve is to force drivers to pay more for the same pavement. In reducing it to a background noise, it would be less attractive since it would force drivers to pay more for the same pavement. In reducing it to a background noise, it would be less attractive.

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