Tuesday, October 13, 2009 41 Comments

Paradox, Schmaradox. Congestion Pricing Works.

by Charles Komanoff on October 13, 2009

We're used to seeing bizarre patterns of thinking on the Wall Street Journal's editorial pages, but an op-ed in Friday's Journal took it to a new level: "How Traffic Jams Help the Environment."

Photo: The Wall Street Journal

Still more bizarrely, the author was New Yorker writer David Owen, promoter of the commonsensical idea that urban density is energy-efficient, hence big cities are green.

For some reason Owen has taken a dislike to congestion pricing, and it has led him to construct an elaborate Rube Goldberg argument to prove that congestion pricing leads to more driving:

> If reducing [congestion] merely makes life easier for those who drive, then the improved traffic flow can actually increase the environmental damage done by cars, by raising overall traffic volume, encouraging sprawl and long car commutes.

What a lovely paradox … and how ridiculous, as Owen could have discovered by giving London's congestion pricing experience (or Stockholm's or Singapore's) more than a cursory glance.

As any student of urban traffic now knows, London's cordon pricing scheme cut traffic within the charging zone an average of 15 percent, raised travel speeds 30 percent, and greatly expanded bus ridership and cycle commuting — with little increase in traffic outside the zone or other negative effects. Nearly seven years on, the reasons are fairly obvious:

- Raising the price to drive into the center of London made car commuting less attractive.
- The gain in driving speeds attracted some new trips but not so many as to cancel the lost ones.
- Bus transit benefited from a virtuous cycle in which improved speeds attracted riders, further reducing traffic and also financing service improvements which attracted still more riders, further reducing traffic, etc.
- Ditto for cycling, though here the synergy was via safety in numbers.

All this was intuited back in the day by Transport for London staff, including Jay Walder, who has subsequently become the new MTA chief. The only uncertainty was the extent to which new car trips attracted by the time savings would undercut the reduction in trips from the congestion charge.

As it happened, some "induced traffic," as Owen might have termed it, did materialize, but at far less than the one-for-one rate he assumed in his article. Without it, the drop in traffic might have been 20 percent or more. But the actual equilibrium, a settled 15 percent reduction in cordon traffic, was robust enough to achieve the desired results: faster travel by every mode, greater use of transit, and less VMT (vehicle miles traveled). Congestion pricing is indeed green.

To trace Owen's error, look no further than his hypothesis: "If reducing [congestion] *merely* makes life easier for those who drive …"

Emphasis added; the "merely" is quite important. When the reduction in traffic is caused by a congestion charge, life is not just easier for those who continue driving but more costly as well. Yes, there's a seesaw between price effects and time effects, but setting the congestion price at the right point will rebalance the system toward less driving, without harming the city's economy.

What's that right price point, then? It's not quite rocket science to figure it out, though it does take some thinking (not to mention continual tinkering if exogenous reductions in road capacity erode the original congestion benefits, as TfL reported recently). It's a subject Ted Kheel and I have in fact been thinking about for quite a while now, and if you would like to do some thinking about it too, start with our Balanced Transportation Analyzer and contact us with questions or criticisms (email: kea AT igc.org).

In his piece, Owen linked former Londoner and current MTA honcho Walder with the idea of congestion pricing. One can't help wondering whether he or the Journal intended it as a pre-emptive strike against a possible renewed push for congestion pricing in New York City. Whatever the motivation, it's disappointing to see a writer who has rightly urged Americans to "live closer" peddling the defeatist — and false — notion that the price of urban virtue is eternal gridlock.

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herenthere

This just makes Bloomberg's re-election vital to livable streets and congestion pricing…we

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WORD ON THE STREET

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all know Thompson is basically going to reverse all of his policies on these matters in favor of businesses.

October 13, 2009 at 11:52 am Link #1

vnm

In pooh-pooing the Cash-for-Clunkers program as having the same effect as reducing the gasoline tax, Owen himself states that driving needs to be made more expensive and unattractive for the health of the planet. And the rest of the book is about getting people to live in cities and drive less. So his self-contradictory thinking on congestion pricing runs counter to the main these throughout the rest of his thinking. I can see why it was this particular element that the Journal chose to pick up on.

It is also worth noting that Owen quotes Komanoff approvingly in his first chapter by way of explaining how New York's transportation and land use patterns are the nation's greenest. Nice job then and now, CK.

October 13, 2009 at 11:55 am Link #2

vnm

I think it comes down to this. What is more effective at discouraging people from driving: crushing traffic jams or a small per-trip monetary cost? Elsewhere in his book, Owen marvels that people will radically alter their driving habits over gas price increases that resulted in a charge of 75-cents per week, so clearly monetary cost will have a big impact on one's mode choice.

October 13, 2009 at 12:01 pm Link #3

lee schipper

I agree – what a paradox of, well, lies? In both Stockholm and London traffic is well below _what it would have been_ with no charging, something hard for many to understand and easy for a writer to exploit.

As Shakespeare might have titled it, "All's Well That Ends Well".

As for cash for clunkers, however, that was indeed a real lemon. As my own quickie analysis for the Washington post showed (subsequently verified) http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/graphic/2009/08/08/GR2009080802658.html

the MPG of cars sold under the program were only marginally (7% or so) better than those of all cars sold in the first half of model year 2009 and even less "better" than what Mike Sivak's (U Mich) model predicts, given the price of fuel and state of the economy at that time. So we did not gain much on the new car side. On the clunked car side, by definition clunkers are old and not used much. That means that the fuel savings have to take in to account cars previously the first or/and 2nd cars in the households and bumped downward by the new car. The last such data (for 2001, from Nat Household Travel Survey of DOT) suggest 20-21 MPG for the former "first cars" bumped by the new cars, so the real savings is smaller. And the clunkers would have died soon anyway.

So we saved an itty bitty amount of fuel, per car, at $4000 average subsidy.

Of course more analysis is warranted, when the 2008 Nat Travel Survey comes out (January) and when/if DOT releases such factoids as the average age and odometer setting of each car clunked, to see (beyond the MPG of clunked cars, which was low) what really was gained. Further, we'd like to know the MPG of all cars clunked in 2009 to see whether C4C did anything that was not happening anyway.

As Shakespeare said, ?Much ado about nothing"?

Lee Schipper
Berkeley and Stanford

October 13, 2009 at 12:13 pm Link #4

Lorna Salzman

We environmentalists are now facing the most massive resistance to any kind of change in our habits, even the kind that is beneficial. The business community is pulling its weight to prevent and roll back policies, statutes and just common sense. The recession may be the proximate cause, as some believe, but I think that they have seized the opportunity to frighten the public and elected officials away from anything that might increase costs for business or consumers sufficiently to curb energy use and consumption. Even the spectre of catastrophic global warming is having almost no effect. I believe we will have to suffer some palpable and extensive direct harm from global warming before they take it seriously. As for making cars more expensive to use in the city, it is not as if NYC were not already a major tourist attraction or as if its year-round attractions (museums, theaters, concerts, restaurants) were devoid of clientele. We were in the city on Columbus Day and the auto traffic was overwhelming; my first thought was: why isn't the city getting revenues from these

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idiots who have come into the city this weekend ? If they don't want to pay to clog the streets, then let them pay the cost of public transportation so our states (NJ, NY, Connecticut) can support public transportation networks. It is all very discouraging and depressing to realize that we have to sit back and wait for disasters so we can say: We told you so. Except for Bloomberg the other politicians are all complete blooming idiots when it comes to transportation. And they continue to fool the public and play to their fears about shelling out an extra few bucks for the privilege of filling our streets up with noisy dirty cars at the expense of public transportation.

October 13, 2009 at 12:58 pm Link #5

J

Here are the last three sentences of his op-ed, in which he thoroughly contradicts himself:

"Which is not to say that making drivers pay is a bad idea. It is absurd, in New York, that the East River bridges still don't charge tolls and that curbside parking in much of the city is free. A truly effective traffic program for any dense city would impose high fees for all automobile access and public parking while also gradually eliminating automobile lanes (thereby reducing total car traffic volume without eliminating the environmentally beneficial burden of driver frustration and inefficiency) and increasing the capacity and efficiency of public transit."

October 13, 2009 at 1:02 pm Link #6

Charles Siegel

I posted this comment about the arcticle on Planetizen:

"He is right that traffic congestion can be good for the environment by shifting people to other forms of transportation – but it nonsense to turn this into an argument against congestion pricing.

"In reality, congestion can discourage automobile use, but congestion pricing can do even more to discourage automobile use

"Imagine the same roads (no change in capacity), first with traffic congestion and second with free flowing traffic because of congestion pricing. There are obviously fewer people driving in the second scenario than in the first: that is why the traffic is free flowing rather than congested. More people were shifted to transit or other alternatives because of congestion pricing than were shifted by congestion."

Another way of saying it is that there are two effects involved: the pricing effect discourages driving, and the speed effect encourages driving. But for congestion pricing to reduce congestion at all, the pricing effect must outweigh the speed effect.

October 13, 2009 at 1:08 pm Link #7

J:Lai

I'm not familiar with this author, but this WSJ article contains such glaring logical fallacies that I can only assume he's purposely trying to obfuscate the issue.

If there is any elasticity of demand to drive in the congestion zone, then there will be marginal decrease in driving when the price goes up.

Owen argues that there is an offsetting phenomenon in which there is a marginal increase in demand to drive in response to the reduction of traffic congestion. However, the last marginal increase in demand must occur at level of congestion below the equilibrium under zero congestion fee (otherwise that demand would already have existed.)

In other wordds, even in the strongest case of his argument, where there is maximum demand increase in response to reduced congestion, total amount of driving will still be lower than under zero congestion fee.

In addition, the congestion fee transfers the cost of the externalities of driving to the actual drivers, creating potential revenue streams for public transit or other non-car modes of transportation.

This logical pretzel twists in this article remind me a lot of the editorials attempting to debunk global climate change.

October 13, 2009 at 1:19 pm Link #8

Mark Walker

herenthere: "...we all know Thompson is basically going to reverse all of his policies on these matters in favor of businesses."

I agree that Bloomberg is a far better deal for the livable streets movement than Thompson. And I'll vote accordingly. But:

Congestion pricing foes have a strong weapon in their argument that CP needlessly penalizes businesses. After all, car commuters often have other transport options, while a

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bakery in Brooklyn delivering to restaurants in Manhattan does not. So while CP can raise revenue from trucks, it can't change behavior. And whether the revenue-raising is fair is debatable.

The solution is to exempt delivery trucks from CP and concentrate on cars, which take up most of the space on our streets anyway.

In case anyone gets the wrong impression, I am fervently in favor of CP. It was the first political issue that ever moved me to write to my electeds.

October 13, 2009 at 1:21 pm Link #9

J:Lai

Charles Siegel:

The speed effect must always be less than or eqaul to cost effect. Crossed posts with you above.

"Another way of saying it is that there are two effects involved: the pricing effect discourages driving, and the speed effect encourages driving. But for congestion pricing to reduce congestion at all, the pricing effect must outweigh the speed effect."

October 13, 2009 at 1:22 pm Link #10

ddartley

"Muddled" was a kind word for streetsblog to use about this article in "Today's Headlines."

My head was spinning as I read it thanks to Owen's use of circular logic based on premises he didn't support.

Just a couple more huge problems with the article:

First, "Traffic jams, if they're managed well, can actually be good for the environment. They maintain a level of frustration that turns drivers into subway riders or pedestrians."

He offers no support for either claim.

The idea that frustration might turn commuters away from cars may have some small effect in reality, but mainly, it's a Yogi Berra-ism that I've heard others use to oppose congestion pricing: "Nobody goes there anymore; it's too crowded."

"Congestion isn't an environmental problem; it's a driving problem." Um, WHAT? Are the two mutually exclusive? No. Yet he doesn't explain how it's NOT an environmental problem.

October 13, 2009 at 1:36 pm Link #11

Ian Dutton

Too bad the Journal can't get on the same page as New York's business community, whose support of congestion pricing as a strategy to mitigate the disastrous economic consequences of congestion was vital to putting it on the front burner of our business-conscious mayor.

How did the Journal fall off that bandwagon? They don't see market pricing as the solution, as they do in so many other less-socially-conscious contexts?

October 13, 2009 at 1:49 pm Link #12

Michael Koehn

@Mark Walker:

It's unclear as to whether congestion pricing will end up actually costing business money or not. Let's consider your hypothetical bakery. Say that this is a large bakery, which provides many restaurants in Manhattan with bread. It transports so much bread that it needs 5 trucks to do its daily runs in the time window it has.

Now, enter congestion pricing. True, the bakery will get charged for each vehicle entering the congestion zone. However, because of the reduction in traffic, each truck can make more deliveries in the same amount of time. If those time savings allow the owner make all daily deliveries with 4 tucks (eliminating one truck), then it's likely that this business will have SAVED money, even after having paid the congestion charge.

For many delivery- and service-based businesses, where profit is a factor of how many clients they can visit in one day, congestion pricing has the potential to be revenue neutral or even revenue positive.

October 13, 2009 at 1:50 pm Link #13

Nick Grossman
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Ian Dutton

But Mark:

> Congestion pricing foes have a strong weapon in their argument that CP needlessly penalizes businesses.

But that's the narrow view of the opponents. Wouldn't you agree that if the efficiency of a businesses deliveries was greatly improved, you'd actually be doing those small businesses a great favor? Saving just 30 minutes over the course of the day – or 1 parking ticket – for a driver plus a delivery vehicle would far outweigh the proposed truck fee. And if that wasn't incentive enough, then the business might also find a way to make deliveries at off-peak hours and thus more efficiently balance the load on our roadways.

And if traffic jams were diminished, you could also be far more reliable in your deliveries, again something worth more than a small fee.

…from one supporter to another… 🙂

October 13, 2009 at 1:56 pm Link #14

Michael Smith

I did some digging on this Minnesota business Owen mentions.

As far as I can tell, the Minnesota system doesn't impose a charge; it just gates people onto certain segments of freeway at set intervals during busy periods.

The agency compared with-metering and without-metering periods of several weeks. During the without-metering period traffic volumes did indeed fall, but as they say:

—–

After the meters were turned off, the evaluation team observed an average nine percent traffic volume reduction on freeways. No significant traffic volume change was observed on the parallel arterials which were studied by the evaluation team. There was some diversion to other time periods and no significant diversion to transit. The reduced freeway traffic volume most likely was diverted to earlier or later time periods and to local streets not under observation by the evaluation team.

http://www.itsdocs.fhwa.dot.gov/JPODOCS/REPTS_TE/13425.pdf

Quite dishonest on Owen's part.

October 13, 2009 at 2:08 pm Link #15

J:Lai

The assertion that congestion pricing is bad for business is another populist fallacy.

I am a small business owner in NYC. As some may know, NYC has recently imposed a "metropolitan mobility tax" (MMT) on area businesses. It takes the form of an increase in the payroll tax. Nominally, it is to help fund the MTA budget shortfall, although I do not know if the revenue is actually dedicated by law to that purpose.

As a business owner, I would much prefer the alternative of a congestion tax on delivery vehicles.

The MMT method gives me a disincentive to put people on my payroll, and otherwise provide no opportunity for me to change my behavior to respond to the tax.

On the other hand, I receive deliveries from suppliers several times a week. If they had to pay congestion charges on their trucks, they could choose to pass this cost through to me. (As an aside, many of my suppliers did add delivery surcharges when gas prices were high.) I would then have an incentive to consolidate or otherwise minimize the number/frequency of my deliveries – a good outcome. To the extent that I am paying more for deliveries, I now have the choice to absorb the cost or pass it through to my customers.

Congestion fees that do not hit delivery vehicles are only a half-measure. Should Fresh Direct pay any share of a congestion fee? I think they should pay a very large share. Then they can pass that through to their customers, if they are able to. That is much better than having a major contributor to congestion, like Fresh Direct, subsidized for the externalities they create by everyone else.

October 13, 2009 at 2:20 pm Link #16

gecko

While fully supportive of congestion pricing, it is somewhat of a digression, red herring, and major improvements in livable streets and sustainability will come from extensive large scale public and private bike systems with advanced systems to follow.

October 13, 2009 at 3:01 pm Link #17

J:Lai

"While fully supportive of congestion pricing, it is somewhat of a digression, red herring, and major improvements in livable streets and sustainability will come from extensive large scale public and private bike systems with advanced systems to follow."

Gecko – have to disagree with you here. I don't see biking as ever representing more than a small proportion of total trips or miles traveled in NYC, let alone trips beyond the city. I think 10% would be incredible, probably at the very high end of the possible range.
Major improvement has to come from public transit – it's just not feasible to move enough people on bicycles.

October 13, 2009 at 3:09 pm Link #18

vnm

As Vukan Vuchic would say: You have to have automobile use disincentives combined with transit/bicycling/walking incentives. Right now we are incentivizing everything.

October 13, 2009 at 3:46 pm Link #19

Mark Walker

Thank you everyone for the thoughtful responses to my comment. The problem I referred to was mainly political, but you've given me a lot to think about.

October 13, 2009 at 3:47 pm Link #20

gecko

#18 J:Lai, ". . . not feasible to move enough people on bicycles."

gee, what about the 600 million cyclists at the beginning of china's industrial revolution?

the estimate was that there was one-half million cyclists took to the streets during the last transit strike which happened overnight.

this is not the requisite millions required by nyc daily multi-million passenger commutes but the refrain was heard by even more: "get me a bike and i will get to work!"

40-percent cycling small cities like amsterdam and copenhagen do not nearly have the capacity that nyc does.

October 13, 2009 at 3:52 pm Link #21

gecko

#18 J:Lai, ". . . not feasible to move enough people on bicycles." (continued)

the estimate for the summer streets ents was as much 200,000 (0.2 million) people which was essentially one street and not at capacity.

October 13, 2009 at 3:57 pm Link #22

Charles Siegel

Thinking about the nasty way that the publishing world works, I realized that some editor of the Wall Street Journal must have heard about Owen's book and offered Owen the opportunity of writing an op-ed only if the op-ed was about why he opposed congestion pricing. That op-ed is an excellent way to publicize a book, so Owen was obviously under a lot of pressure to write what the editor wanted.

This explains why the "bizarre patterns of thinking on the Wall Street Journal's editorial pages" appeared, "still more bizarrely," in an op-ed whose "author was New Yorker writer David Owen, promoter of the commonsensical idea that urban density is energy-efficient, hence big cities are green."

J Lai, yes, I noticed that we were making a similar point, and I assumed it was a crossed post.

October 13, 2009 at 4:00 pm Link #23

Bern Grush

"traffic congestion can be good for the environment by shifting people to other forms of transportation" is like saying "wife-beating is good, because it may bring the plight of abused women to the attention of the authorities".

October 13, 2009 at 4:32 pm Link #24

Erik Sandblom

I don't think the WSJ article is illogical.

A street or road moves the most traffic when the cars are moving at 30 – 50 km/h or so. If the traffic slows down or comes to a standstill, that means throughput is falling. That means fewer cars.

If a congestion charge gets traffic moving again, letting traffic go faster, that means throughput is higher. That means more cars.

I know that's not the result from London and Stockholm, where car traffic fell after putting in the congestion charge. That tells me they are charging more than what's needed to keep traffic moving. Which is fine with me, because it makes the city more livable.

October 13, 2009 at 4:43 pm Link #25

Katie

Seems to me that both the article and these comments are missing the point. Congestion pricing isn't intended to solve an environmental problem, it's intended to solve a congestion problem. These are NOT the same thing.

October 13, 2009 at 6:47 pm Link #26

Akiva

I recently wrote a paper which analyzes congestion pricing through the views of Pigou and Coase, both famous welfare economists. Bottom line is congestion pricing works in theory and in actuality.

Check it out – http://www.scribd.com/doc/19400824/Welfare-Economics-and-Congestion-Pricing

October 13, 2009 at 6:47 pm Link #27

vnm

Here's my read on this overall situation, after sitting down and taking a few deep breaths.

Here's an author who is very concerned that overuse of the automobile is killing our planet / nation, a sentiment most on this board would agree with. As a remedy, he proposes that much of the rest of the nation come to look and act more like the city those of us on this board call home and are seeking to improve further.

As a sub-point to his message that we need to reduce auto-dependence, he throws out an idea that traffic itself is more of a deterrent to further traffic than rational pricing of street space or rational pricing of the environmental damage caused by cars. This ill-informed and perhaps hastily arrived-at point is the one seized upon by Rupert Murdoch's Wall Street Journal.

I think we should not fixate too much on this one baffling excerpt, and instead look to the overall message that sustainability begins and ends with cities like New York. "In a world of nearly 7 billion people and counting, sustainability, if it can be achieved," he writes, "will look a lot more like midtown Manhattan than like rural Vermont."

October 13, 2009 at 8:49 pm Link #28

vnm

I think Erik Sandblom makes a tremendous point. We are currently at traffic throughput of X. One possible outcome of congestion pricing could be that traffic throughput increases to X + some number, increasing vehicle miles traveled. Another outcome more commonly seen in real life, and the one that would presumably be the goal of congestion pricing, would be that traffic decreases to X minus some number, while at the same time providing revenue for mass transit that David Owen says is so critical for sustainability. Most likely, uncovering the fact that the first scenario is theoretically possible is a red herring, the mere bringing up of which sets back the effort to enact congestion pricing, which would most likely do a tremendous amount of good by the author's own standards.

October 13, 2009 at 8:59 pm Link #29

Charles Komanoff

Erik Sandblom's concern is of theoretical interest only. Traffic speeds in any area being congestion-priced will be heterogeneous, with only some speeds falling within a range that might allow a drop in trips to lead to an increase in throughput. I don't have a proof handy, but I bet that reaching Erik's perverse outcome would be tantamount to threading a series of impenetrable needles. (The "speed-volume, non-cordon" equation in the BTA model would be a good place to start.)

I agree with Katie that congestion pricing won't bring huge benefits in conventional environmental terms like carbon or air emissions or even fewer crashes. In most of the scenarios that are pre-modeled in the BTA, these "enviro" benefits are eclipsed (slightly) by physical-activity benefits and dwarfed by time-saving benefits. (See graph in the Cost-Benefit worksheet.) As an inveterate contrarian, I kind of dig that. What's maddening about Owen's article is his insistence, at least some of the time, that congestion pricing won't solve *congestion*, a position that is plain untrue and cried out for rebuttal.

October 13, 2009 at 9:55 pm Link #30

Katie

Lest anyone get the wrong impression, I should probably elaborate to say that, in addition to totally supporting congestion pricing, I am all for charging drivers the full cost of the environmental (not to mention health) impacts of their driving. It's just that an "environmental" pricing policy would be somewhat different than a "congestion" pricing policy because ALL driving has environmental impacts–and those impacts fall disproportionately on certain (usually poor) communities–but only peak-hour driving has congestion impacts (unless you live in LA where there's always congestion).

It's pretty important not to confuse the two issues, because doing so can lead to wacky things like calling traffic jams the "solution" to the environmental impacts of driving.

October 13, 2009 at 10:40 pm Link #31

Jonathan

I think Owen is right, or right enough. Traffic jams are an effective signal to drivers *at the margin* that they should probably choose to take the train. Are there other signals? Yes.

Bear in mind that Owen in his article isn't addressing these other important issues:

The question of drivers paying the cost of their using the roads;

The unequal distribution of street space among automobilists, mass transit, cyclists, and pedestrians;

The localized effects of congestion that fall more heavily on certain neighborhoods, like exhaust-pipe pollution;

The negative effects of automobilism on business formation and development, particularly in the suburbs;

The death toll and morbidity of automobile crashes.

But as to the subpoint that vnm brings up, in #28 above: "that traffic itself is more of a deterrent to further traffic than rational pricing of street space or rational pricing of the environmental damage caused by cars": that seems incredibly obvious.

Back when I had a car, I would from time to time drive downtown in the evenings to pick up my roommate, because it was quicker than the train, but I wouldn't drive in to drop her off in the morning, when it was slower than the subway. Traffic kept me from driving, like Owen says. If the driving trip was always quicker than the subway trip, but cost $20, I might have driven more often in the mornings, because it would have been more convenient than the subway and cheaper than a taxi.

October 14, 2009 at 8:01 am Link #32

ddartley

Owen and many others act as if "carbon" is the only environmental harm in the world.

There are a lot more immediate damaging effects, too. Just reason # 100 that his "traffic jams – good for environment" is light years into insane-land.

October 14, 2009 at 9:52 am Link #33

Ian Turner

Erik, you are confusing the speed of maximum auto throughput with the speed of maximum auto density. It's the density that matters with respect to air pollution, not the throughput, because the emissions of a car driving at 30 MPH are not 30X the emissions of a car driving at 1 MPH.

It is not possible for congestion pricing to increase auto density, though in some theoretically inelastic world (not this one), congestion pricing might raise money from drivers without decreasing auto density.

October 14, 2009 at 10:09 am Link #34

AlexB

Thank you Erik Sandblom for pointing out the main point of congestion pricing and the only reason why we can take David Owen's article seriously. The point of congestion pricing is not just to disincentivize driving and provide a new funding source for transit, it is also to maximize the efficiency of the roads we always have. If someone has no problem paying the congestion fee and parking, it becomes faster to drive from farther away (potentially leading to more mcmansions farther out). Overall car use will decrease, but it may not for those who can afford it.

To Ian Turner, you make the comparison of auto density and auto throughput. Ian correctly asserts that auto density is the cause of pollution.

Being honest, he have to recognize certain things about congestions pricing:
1) Pollution will decrease
2) Transit use will increase
3) Auto use will decrease
4) There will be more cars driving into the city, and their users will be wealthier

#3 and #4 seem to be mutually exclusive but they are not. The more cars there are, the fewer cars can move. If we decrease auto density, we will increase auto throughput. The only way to change #4 would be to lower the capacity for more cars. This can be done by converting lanes on the bridges and tunnels to bus only, or bike only, for example.

An interesting comparison is what Houston did with its highways. They built the most extensive HOV lane system in the world, beginning in the 80s when voters turned down rail transit. Because they were able to use their lanes so much more efficiently, they were able to squeeze many more people onto the highways. The number of cars didn't really change, but people started carpooling or taking the bus, both of which use the lanes. In a lot of ways, this was great, but I wonder if Houston would implemented a Dallas-like light rail system sooner if they had not made their highways more efficient. Even though they now have light rail, there are no plans to extend it deep into the suburbs like they did in Dallas.

October 14, 2009 at 11:41 am Link #35

Ian Turner

Alex,

It should be noted that if there are more cars driving into the city due to congestion pricing, you can also expect that there will be more cars driving out of the city. Number of cars actually in the city should decrease.

–Ian

October 14, 2009 at 12:41 pm Link #36

J:Lai

Erik Sandblom, vnm, anyone else who thinks that there is a logical basis for Owen's argument –
there is not.

The mechanism by which congestion pricing increases vehicle speeds is that it reduces the number of vehicles. A decrease in the number of vehicles will indeed allow greater speed, which may attract some additional drivers. However, each additional driver attracted by the convenience of increased speed will also increase the congestion, thereby decreasing vehicle speed.

If 100 current drivers stop driving because of a congestion charge, at the ABSOLUTE MAXIMUM 99 new drivers will begin driving because of increased speedds. The 100th new driver would return speeds to exactly where they were pre-congestion charge, and therefore will not start driving.

Thus, congestion charges can not produce a situation where there are more drivers than without the charge.

It is possible that the new drivers would be making longer commutes than the drivers they replace. From the standpoint of reducing congestion and making more efficient use of roads, this does not matter. From the environmental standpoint, this may be a net positive or negative depending on many things like the relative efficiency of the vehicles driven, etc. However, it is entirely speculative and not at all germane to the assertion in Owen's article.

Gecko, I disagree with many of your assumptions about the ability of bicycles to replace other forms of transit at a large scale, but we will leave that for another time.

October 14, 2009 at 1:02 pm Link #37

gecko

#36 J:Lai "I disagree with many of your assumptions about the ability of bicycles to replace other forms of transit at a large scale"

gee again.

You may want to even consider more advanced forms like the proof-of-concept prototype human-powered monorail Shweeb in New Zealand:

". . . currently reaching speeds of 90 kph (56 mph) in sprints.

. . . delivering 20,000+ people per hour in a 1×1 m2 airspace . . ."

http://www.shweeb.com/Shweeb/technology_IDL=1_IDT=2190_ID=13165_.html

October 14, 2009 at 1:36 pm Link #38

gecko

#36 J:Lai "I disagree with many of your assumptions about the ability of bicycles to replace other forms of transit at a large scale" (continued)

Further, a maxed out 50-foot 35-ton (unpopulated) subway car carries 188 people still partially human powered since most people have to stand. So a 10-car subway train carries 1,880 people maxed in a 500-foot vehicle but likely requires something like one-quarter mile (5,280 feet divided by 4) between trains to maintain a safe stopping distance at any reasonable speed.

All this underground which lots of people have to enter and exit through relatively narrow stairways and again mostly providing their own human power.

Do the math. Let me know what you come up with. Try to explain to me how this makes good design sense, practicality, ease-of-use, convenience, cost, accessibility, etc., for "transit at a large scale" in a city where the public street space is supposedly freely available and greatly exceeds that of its subway's tunnels.

Moreover, New York City is in it densest areas a highly tiered living, working and human-powered walking-about environment and transit can easily be same way if many extra tons of steel and glass do not have to be moved at the same time; potentially, greatly amplifying mobility densities.

October 14, 2009 at 2:21 pm Link #39

Jonathan

J:Lai, you are being a little simplistic here. For one, a cordon-pricing plan (like the toll-all-the-bridges plan of last year), which doesn't charge center-city residents, could result in an increase in those residents' automobile use. If the streets are free of outer-borough traffic, more of my Manhattan neighbors might drive to work, or simply make extra automobile trips within the cordon that without CP, they would have made by subway or taxi.

Secondly, once an automobile has paid the congestion charge, there's no reason not to keep driving. Using the car to make secondary trips within the cordon (daycare, lunch, library, theater, dinner, etc.) could easily create more congestion within the zone.

I think you're probably correct that "congestion charges can not produce a situation where there are more drivers than without the charge," but that statement does not rule out the possibility that the fewer drivers are putting in more miles within the zone than previously.

October 14, 2009 at 2:43 pm Link #40

Libertyscott

Having spent some years of my life working in road pricing I'd like to think I know what I'm talking about. One of the appalling myths I've found is the idea that congestion is "good". In essence, that having what is a core city network utility functioning erratically is a positive thing.

It isn't. It wastes time for those stuck, it wastes fuel and increases pollution, and traps a substantial number of road users with every good reason to use the road behind those who could make alternative choices by route, mode or time of day.

The list of cities to have achieved positive benefits from congestion charging is growing. Singapore is the best example, but sadly too many people from North America or Europe patronisingly think that a highly developed Asian city state can teach them nothing. Since then, London and Stockholm are well known having achieved improved flows, reduced car traffic, better flowing bus and taxi traffic, and increases in cycling and walking. Oslo also effectively has a congestion charge as its toll ring has paid off the debt related to the major highway and public transport improvements it helped finance. Sydney recently introduced peak tolls on its Harbour Bridge and Tunnel improving peak flows, and resulting in some diversion to rail and bus.

The big mistake is for people to transplant schemes from other cities onto the city one is talking about. It wont work because cities have all got different urban form, different road and public transport patterns, commute periods and other interdependencies. A congestion charging option needs to be designed, bespoke. It needs to address questions of enforcement, what to do with the revenue, and whether the design can minimise unfairness to any groups of users (and whether the unfairness is real). Road users also need to get something in return, in New York I'd suggest that dealing with a massive backlog in deferred maintenance on the streets would be the obvious answer (which benefits pedestrians and cyclists as well as remaining road users).

For New York it should be a matter of when, and what sort of option to select, not if.

October 19, 2009 at 7:48 am Link #41

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