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Getting Around: How much are you willing to pay to avoid traffic?

Campaign seeks public support for congestion-pricing plan on Chicago-area roads



The Eisenhower Expressway (I-290) is one of the Chicago-area corridors being considered for congestion pricing. If a pay lane is added, drivers on I-290 could save 23 minutes during a morning rush-hour commute, according to a study. (Heather Charles, Chicago Tribune / October 10, 2012)

Jon Hilkevitch: Getting Around

October 15, 2012

A campaign being launched Monday is aimed at building political and public support for finally taking strong action against traffic congestion in the Chicago area after years of mulling possible solutions while bemoaning the bumper-to-bumper march toward gridlock.

How does cutting an average of 25 minutes off the morning commute on the **Stevenson Expressway** between **I-355** and the **Dan Ryan Expressway** sound to you? Or 23 minutes faster than current travel on the **Eisenhower Expressway** from **Mannheim Road** to downtown?

Would driving a steady 55 mph the entire way be worth the price, say, of a latte, particularly on days when you are crunched for time?

JON HILKEVITCH: GETTING AROUND



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Graphic: Congestion-priced lanes proposed



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Officials at the **Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning** think drivers will see value in a congestion-pricing plan that the agency is recommending be implemented on new highway lanes planned on six major existing and future roadways across the six-county area. Under congestion pricing, drivers who opt to use free-flowing express lanes pay a fee, or an extra toll on the **Illinois Tollway**, during peak traffic periods. The price goes down when fewer vehicles are on the roads.

An interactive website showing details from a driver's perspective on how the express lanes would be accessed and fees paid is at <http://www.cmap.illinois.gov/congestion-pricing>.

"Congestion pricing is a way of evening out travel demand and getting traffic to free-flowing speeds by encouraging people to think harder about when they want to drive and maybe take public transit instead," said Jesse Elam, a senior planner at CMAP.

The corridors selected for congestion pricing in the CMAP study are the **Stevenson (I-55)**; **Eisenhower (I-290)**; the **Jane Addams Memorial Tollway (I-90)**; the planned **Elgin-O'Hare West Bypass**; and in central Lake County, the planned **Illinois Highway 53 north extension**; and the planned **Illinois Highway 120 bypass**.

One congestion-priced express lane would be added in each direction on the Stevenson, Eisenhower and Addams, while all lanes would be congestion priced on the new roadways, according to the CMAP plan.

In the proposal, the amount would be 5 cents to 31 cents per mile during rush hours, depending on the specific roadway. That comes out to \$2.76 in the Stevenson scenario and \$3.41 on the Eisenhower.

Based on driver surveys, motorists would use the congestion-priced express lanes only when they need to, for an average of two to three one-way trips per week, CMAP said.

The congestion-pricing plan would generate an estimated \$74 million annually in gross revenue, according to CMAP. Officials at the agency said the money could be used to help fund capacity-expansion projects and improvements to mass transit.

Brenda Woods of Hinsdale, an accountant and former New Yorker said she would prefer to ride public transit but must drive around the Chicago area to meet with clients. She said she is "most willing" to pay extra if it means predictable and reliable driving times.

"I juggle a lot with young children in school and a busy husband who travels a lot," said Woods, 41. "What slays me is that on some days it takes 45 minutes, and on other days more than two hours to drive the same route."

Congestion pricing has been introduced to manage traffic in other parts of the U.S., particularly on the coasts. But transportation officials in the Midwest have tended to take a conservative approach to dealing with traffic, to the point of ignoring successful tools including high-occupancy vehicle lanes that promote carpooling and high-occupancy toll lanes.

"We are 10 years behind the rest of the country, so this is long overdue," said Joe Schwieterman, a transportation professor at DePaul University who has long supported congestion pricing.

The Illinois Tollway's 87.5 percent increase in tolls this year "did nothing to encourage smart economizing on driving," Schwieterman said. "I think people are starting to understand we have no realistic chance of building our way out of this mess. It's just not mathematically possible that transit alone can bail us out of suburban gridlock."

CMAP has made congestion pricing a top priority in its "Go to 2040" blueprint for improving infrastructure and the quality of life in northeastern Illinois.

"We realize the negative is that some people here don't want to pay for using roads at all," CMAP Executive Director Randy Blankenhorn said. "The truth is that somehow we have to maintain our transportation system."

CMAP officials said their goal is to get congestion pricing up and running within three or four years, starting on the Addams. A widening project is slated to begin on the I-90 corridor next year, and the tollway has previously identified it for a possible congestion-pricing experiment.

The Addams roadwork, between **O'Hare International Airport** and Rockford, will be completed by 2016 to accommodate express toll lanes, according to the toll authority. Results of a federally funded I-90 express toll lane study are expected in early 2013, toll authority spokeswoman Wendy Abrams said.

Congestion-priced express lanes on I-90 would shave 11 minutes from the current travel between Elgin and I-294 during the morning's peak traffic period, according to the CMAP computer modeling. It would cost drivers 11 cents per mile, up from 6 cents per mile today, or \$2.53 instead of \$1.30. In addition, congestion would decline a projected 7 percent on parallel arterial roads.

About half of respondents (51 percent) said they favor exploring options for express toll lanes that would cost drivers more, while 23 percent were opposed, according to a recent tollway-sponsored survey.

After years of studying congestion pricing, including a 2010 analysis by the tollway and the **Metropolitan Planning Council** that focused on achieving 45 mph flows on portions of the Addams, Stevenson and the reversible lanes of the Kennedy Expressway, CMAP officials are pressing for a consensus and quick action on their 55-mph-flow express lane plan.

"Congestion pricing is not something we are pie-in-the-skying for 20 years from now," Blankenhorn said.

"If we just build another lane and do nothing else, it's not going to be too long until it's full," he said. "The toll authority is finding that out on **I-88 (Reagan Memorial Tollway)** and the **Tri-State Tollway (I-294)** with the lanes they just added. We need to start managing the traffic or congestion is not going to get better."

Drivers using congestion-priced express lanes during the morning peak would have their trips shortened by 31 percent to 66 percent compared with current travel times, the CMAP analysis showed.

In addition, faster, more reliable travel times would spill over to the free lanes on expressways, benefiting drivers paying no extra fee, because of the capacity gained from the newly built express lanes, according to computer modeling and analysis by CMAP.

Congestion-related delays on the free lanes would decline 24 percent to 33 percent, depending on the road, according to the CMAP modeling.

Arterial streets that are adjacent to the highways also would presumably see 6 percent to 10 percent fewer congestion delays because the added lane capacity and improved flow on the highways would minimize the use of the arterials as an alternate route, officials said.

Transportation experts said the findings should allay concerns among suburban mayors who fear congestion pricing will send additional traffic streaming onto their streets.

"I think the political understanding and the political will are there from some mayors. It will now have to trickle down to the populace," said Peter Skosey, vice president of the Metropolitan Planning Council.

The state's top transportation official said she thinks the congestion-weary public wants change and may be ready to help pay for it. She also said she's optimistic that recent synergy between the Illinois Tollway, **the Illinois Department of Transportation** and CMAP to manage toll facilities will produce results.

"We are moving forward studying Eisenhower and Stevenson widening projects, and I think there is enough energy between the agencies to try and make the system work better," said Illinois Transportation Secretary Ann Schneider. "That is further than we have been in the past."