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PERSPECTIVE

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"Congestion pricing" for tolls in some U.S. cities is based on demand at various times of day.

Putting the speed back in speedway

By Randy Blankenhorn

A NEW PLAN OF CHICAGO

Rather than curse fate the next time you're stuck on Interstate 55 (or any expressway), instead consider whether you'd be willing to pay about the price of a Starbucks coffee to reach your destination 25 minutes faster. Even ignoring the fact that caffeine just adds to your aggravation, frustrated drivers across metropolitan Chicago should ask themselves why our region doesn't use a simple tool that has significantly reduced congestion in 10 other U.S. regions.

Traffic isn't just a drag for commuters, it is a major drag on our economy and quality of life. Looking at factors such as hours in traffic, cost of gas and difficulty of driving and parking, Forbes magazine recently called Chicago the second-most frustrating city for drivers, behind only New York. A more rigorous analysis by the Texas A&M Transportation Institute consistently places metropolitan Chicago among three cities where expressway travel is least reliable.

The Metropolitan Planning Council has pegged the annual cost of clogged roadways to our region at $7.3 billion in lost time, fuel, productivity and environmental damages. If vast sums of money were available for new roads — and they certainly are not — experience has proven that simply pouring concrete barely puts a dent in this problem. New expressways and traffic lanes get congested soon after being built, and the cycle begins again.

It doesn't have to be that way, which brings us back to that simple tool already being used in cities like Atlanta, Baltimore, Los Angeles and Minneapolis. Express toll lanes are helping these cities get the most out of their infrastructure investments. Our region is overdue to implement "congestion pricing," in which tolls rise and fall depending on demand at various times of day. It gives drivers the option to pay a premium when they need to reach their destination quickly. It also gives them an incentive to travel in cheaper periods when there's less traffic. And it makes the expressways more reliable for all.

The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, or CMAP, has urged the Illinois State Toll Highway Authority to implement express toll lanes for managing traffic on the Elgin O'Hare western access project that broke ground in October, on the additional Jane Addams Memorial Tollway lanes now under construction and on the proposed Illinois Route 53 north extension and the Illinois Route 120 bypass. Also, the Illinois Department of Transportation should deploy congestion pricing for the new lanes to be added on I-290 and I-55.

If IDOT and the tollway system don't follow this recommendation of GO TO 2040, CMAP's long-range comprehensive plan, the new roads will soon become as congested as the old. But these expansion projects should be just the start of express tolling to manage traffic across our region. Once it proves successful, congestion pricing should become the norm.

In addition to managing traffic, express toll revenues would help pay for maintenance and even some transit service. But the main reason for congestion pricing is to keep traffic flowing. For $2.75, morning express-lane drivers on I-55 from I-355, for example, would reach downtown 25 minutes faster. Congestion even in the general-purpose lanes would be reduced by up to 33 percent. Congestion on local streets in these corridors would also be reduced.

Our economy would also benefit by moving people and goods through the region more efficiently. Congestion pricing would increase gross regional product an estimated $2 billion annually, with a business output increase of about $94 billion from 2016 to 2040.

The days of reliable funds from Washington and Springfield are long gone, so our region's road investments simply must yield maximum benefits for reducing congestion.

Adopted three years ago as the region's long-term guide for achieving sustainable prosperity, the overall purpose of GO TO 2040 is to ensure that metropolitan Chicago — with its 284 municipalities and seven counties — is a prosperous region. Congestion is hobbling our economic competitiveness and quality of life. Express toll lanes can be a major part of the solution and should be implemented.

Randy Blankenhorn is the executive director of the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning.