

# GETTING A GRIP ON GRIDLOCK

## SoCal transportation planners weigh the pros and cons of congestion pricing

BY JIM BENNING • ILLUSTRATION BY NEIL WEBB

In matters of traffic, Spencer Nelson knows his onions, as the Brits say. The London taxi driver can get you from Piccadilly Circus to Paddington Station without the faintest whisper of a GPS—and when cars back up, he knows every shortcut in the book (and a few not in the book, too). But when he makes the journey from his home in Kent to central London on his days off, Nelson doesn't even think about driving his own Audi. As he explained while steering his black cab down Oxford Street shortly before the pandemic hit, drivers have to not only shell out a small fortune to park in central London, but they frequently must pay additional fees, too, including a then-\$15 congestion charge on weekdays that's designed to cut traffic in London's busy center.

"I would *never* drive my car here," he said. "Unless you have to come to London to deliver something or for some other kind of work, you'd be *mad* to drive into London, wouldn't you?" Instead, in ordinary times, Nelson takes the train.

Nelson's calculus is music to the ears of policy makers well beyond London, including those in Southern California, the nation's gridlock capital, where traffic eased early in the pandemic but has been creeping back toward pre-pandemic levels ever since.

### SHIFTING DEMAND FOR ROADS

Urban planners call the traffic-reduction strategy that's transformed streets in London and a few other large cities around the world "congestion pricing." The concept is simple: Reduce the number of cars on clogged roads by making driving more expensive and, therefore, less appealing. Put another way: Demand for road space often exceeds supply. Instead of trying to increase supply by building new thoroughfares or widening freeways, as we've done for years, congestion pricing aims to reduce demand. When enough drivers decide to use public transit, travel at off-peak times, or carpool, congestion eases. Meanwhile, the congestion-fee revenues are invested into improving public transit and other modes of transport.

Not surprisingly, the strategy can be controversial. Many critics call congestion pricing a tax and argue that such fees hurt

working-class drivers most. Supporters, on the other hand, point out that congestion pricing has reduced gridlock in major cities—including London, Singapore, and Stockholm—and that many people who initially bristle at the approach warm up to it once they experience the benefits.

London began charging motorists to drive into or within the congestion zone in 2003. On the day the fee took effect, the city added 300 buses to its transit network. By the next year, congestion in the center had dropped roughly 30 percent, with about a 15 percent reduction in the number of cars circulating in the zone. (Drivers pay the charge in a variety of ways, including online and by phone; cameras capture license plates to ensure compliance.) Officials took advantage of the reduction in cars by replacing a number of car lanes with dedicated bus and bicycle lanes. A block-long street between Trafalgar Square and the National Gallery became a pedestrian zone where museum-goers could stroll and buskers could perform.

To be sure, the fee hasn't eliminated traffic in the 13-square-mile congestion zone. As ride-hailing apps gained popularity over the years, the number of cars rose, and just before the pandemic hit, congestion was back to about 2002 levels. (Since the pandemic began, congestion has fluctuated, but officials have used the charge to control the number of cars in central London, even temporarily boosting the fee to \$20 to devote more road space to social-distancing pedestrians and cyclists.) Overall, the city center is cleaner and less car-dominated than it was before the fee was implemented, says Christina Calderato, Transport for London's head of transport strategy and planning. "Even now [during an early 2021 lockdown], with lower levels of traffic and greater numbers of people walking and cycling, it remains an important way for us to manage road space effectively."

### TAKING AIM AT GRIDLOCK

Here in the U.S., various cities are now studying the matter or working to implement plans of their own, from New York City, where last year the Trump administration delayed efforts to roll out a charge in Manhattan, to Seattle; Portland, Oregon; and San Francisco. In Southern California, San Diego officials want



to impose new charges on busy highways as part of a comprehensive regional transportation strategy. And in the Los Angeles area, where gridlock is expected to worsen as the population grows, and where congestion pricing has been employed modestly in a number of Express Lanes on Interstates 10 and 110, the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority (Metro) plans to launch an ambitious pilot program somewhere in L.A. County in 2025.

Why is the strategy gaining ground in the U.S. now? We're simply running out of other options to reduce gridlock, says Joshua Schank, who heads Metro's Office of Extraordinary Innovation, which was created in 2015 to identify creative solutions to the region's transportation challenges. "In the last 50 years in the United States, we've been conducting a pilot program that looks at what happens if you build more roads," Schank says. "Does traffic dissipate? The answer is no." And transit investments in recent decades haven't solved traffic woes, either. As a result, he says, we must try new strategies. Metro CEO Philip A. Washington, who's leaving the agency in May, says the consequences of inaction in the L.A. area would be dire: "If we don't do anything, what we're looking at is total gridlock."

Proponents make a number of other arguments, too. Some policy makers see congestion pricing as a powerful revenue-generating tool. In Southern California, most of the revenue generated by the program would likely go toward improving buses and trains, as well as pedestrian and cycling zones. Separately, officials could reduce public transit fares or even make rides free. (Such changes, if realized, could come just in time for the 2028 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles.) Beyond all that, "there's a much deeper understanding of concerns about

climate change, air quality, and the health effects (of automotive congestion)," says Annie Nam of the Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG), the region's six-county planning organization.

## CONCEPTS UNDER CONSIDERATION

In February, Metro officials announced four early concepts for a pilot program and zeroed in on two forms of congestion pricing that could be used alone or in tandem: cordon pricing, in which motorists pay to drive in a designated zone (as in London), and corridor pricing, in which drivers pay to use a stretch of road or freeway. (At the moment, the agency isn't considering a third form known as Vehicle Miles Traveled pricing, in which drivers pay based on distance driven.)

These are the four concepts under consideration:

**Downtown Los Angeles**, where a cordon zone akin to the one in central London would require drivers to pay to enter the area at peak times.

**Interstate 10**, where motorists would pay to drive the freeway, and possibly adjacent arteries, between downtown Los Angeles and the Westside during the busiest hours.

**The Santa Monica Mountains corridor**, where at busy times, drivers would pay to use north-south arteries between Interstate 405 and Interstate 5 from the San Fernando Valley to the L.A. basin. The agency could also limit the fee to a smaller area between US 101 and I-5.

**Downtown Los Angeles freeways**, which would include corridor pricing at peak times in the area.

By summer, Metro's board is expected to select one area of focus, with a vote likely in spring of 2022 on moving forward with a pilot program.

Transportation officials know that rallying public support for new road fees will be challenging. But some observers believe the pandemic's effects could help inspire support. For starters, when stay-at-home orders took effect early last year, Southern Californians experienced a region without gridlock firsthand, says UCLA urban planning associate professor Michael Manville. "To the extent that you convince people that pricing is the policy path that gets you to a situation like that, then people having had this experience might help the cause," he said.

In addition, the recent rise in telecommuting could inspire newly mobile workers who've grown tired of Southern California traffic (not to mention high housing costs and other issues) to leave the region—thus pressuring officials to solve the area's traffic woes to stay competitive, says Marlon Boarnet, a professor at USC's Sol Price School of Public Policy. "The cities that can implement congestion pricing in a way that's smart, that has support, and that's fair, I think, will be positioned long-term to have an advantage in terms of economic development."

Finally, "If people don't like it, then we'll take it out," Metro's Schank says. "But let's at least try something to make a difference, so that when the pandemic ends and the traffic comes

## THE AUTO CLUB ASKS

Congestion pricing could have significant impacts on communities, residents, and businesses in Southern California. As an advocate for traffic safety and mobility for all road users, the Auto Club asked Metro to ensure these **key questions** are answered in the studies that are under way.

- 1 Who will benefit from congestion pricing and how?
- 2 How will congestion pricing affect middle- and lower-income families?
- 3 How much revenue will be collected and how will the funds be used?
- 4 Do Southern Californians understand and support congestion pricing?

back, we don't go back to the misery that a lot of us were experiencing.”

But critics argue that imposing new fees will make life harder for people who are already struggling. “Wealthier people can pay an extra \$10 to \$15 a day and get the benefit of faster drives, while lower-income people could be priced out of their cars,” the *Los Angeles Times* editorial board wrote in 2019. The board voiced little doubt that congestion pricing could reduce the region's traffic and improve air quality. “The unanswered question at this point,” the board concluded, “is whether Metro can do it in a way that's both effective and fair.”

Metro officials say they can. Revenue generated by the fee could subsidize payments for low-income drivers. In addition, those who commute by bus—who disproportionately earn less income—would get around town faster as congestion eases. Also, “you've got traffic congestion on freeways emitting greenhouse gases and other noxious emissions into more poor neighborhoods than anywhere else,” Schank says. “Pricing and mobility improvement packages have the potential to reduce that inequity if they're done correctly.”

Addressing those concerns will be key, said Kome Ajiese, SCAG's executive director. “As we work toward an economic recovery, we don't want to do anything with congestion pricing that would make worse the inequities that are already in place.”

## CHANGE IS COMING

Back in London shortly before the pandemic hit, locals weren't surprised to learn that Southern California might implement congestion pricing to cut traffic. Uber driver Agnon Mayembo smiled knowingly at the news. “I had a couple from L.A. in my car and they were shocked to see so many people out walking around London,” he said. “I said, ‘What do you mean?’ They said most people only travel in their car. Apparently, the transportation system in L.A. isn't very good.”

As he spoke, Sam Cooke's “A Change Is Gonna Come” reverberated from the car stereo, and Mayembo tapped his steering wheel to the beat and sang along:

*It's been a long, long time coming*

*But I know, but I know a change is gonna come*

The song is associated with civil rights and spoke to a different kind of change, but when it ended, Mayembo had transportation on his mind. He glanced back at the visiting writer from Southern California. “A change is gonna come,” he said, grinning. “Change is gonna come to L.A.!”

Will it? Or was he just talking tosh? Only time will tell.

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Westways travel editor **Jim Benning** prefers his coffee mug full and his roads empty.

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# AUTOPIA OR DYSTOPIA?

Looking back on a surreal year on Southern California roads

BY JIM BENNING

**W**hile the novel coronavirus itself is all but invisible, we've seen its impact everywhere, and especially on our roadways. In March of 2020, as the region locked down, traffic congestion—that symbol of Southern California life and a problem so vexing that the brightest minds have been unable to solve it—disappeared almost overnight.

For many Californians, the newly empty roads were a discomfiting novelty—simply further evidence that life as we knew it had changed. For a number of academics and policy analysts, the shift demanded a closer look. “A big event like this gives us opportunities to learn about the world, about ourselves, and ultimately about our interaction with the world,” says Fraser Shilling, who codirects University of California, Davis’ Road Ecology Center.

Early in 2020, Shilling spent hours poring over traffic data to study the lockdown’s impact. From early March to early April, he found driving in California dropped roughly 40 percent, as measured by vehicle miles traveled. Not surprisingly, traffic speeds went up. On once-gridlocked freeways, for example, cars were moving at a steady clip. But Shilling also found the odd driver hurtling along an empty SoCal freeway at 120 or 130 mph. By mid-April of 2020, in fact, the California Highway Patrol reported an 87 percent increase in citations for drivers exceeding 100 mph.

Fortunately, the majority of drivers didn’t indulge their *Fast and the Furious* fantasies. “Most people don’t want to drive superfast because it’s dangerous and scary,” he said.

Traffic patterns on surface streets were upended, too. In Los Angeles, speeds on some city corridors increased by up to 30 percent. Officials urged drivers to slow down, especially because more pedestrians and cyclists were out. To curb speeding, officials turned some daytime traffic signals to nighttime settings so drivers would encounter more red lights.

Analysts discovered that driving patterns varied markedly by neighborhood. Not surprisingly—thanks largely to essential frontline jobs—residents of low-income, Black, and



Latino neighborhoods drove more than did people in more affluent and predominantly white communities. The same held true in public transit use. Decreases in ridership were smaller in communities where residents couldn’t telecommute. “They didn’t have the luxury of working at home,” says Connie Llanos, an executive and racial equity officer at the Los Angeles Department of Transportation.

Were roads safer? Initially, they were. In the first weeks of the shelter-in-place order, the number of crashes on California roads and highways dropped by about half, Shilling found. But when heavy rains hit Southern California in April 2020, crashes shot back up. And by mid-May of last year, fatal crashes on L.A. streets were on par with previous years. Nationwide, according to early estimates by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, fatal crashes in early 2020 were down only slightly compared to the same period in 2019. But according to a preliminary report from the National Safety Council, when comparing 2019 traffic deaths per vehicle miles traveled with the equivalent data from 2020, experts found an alarming 24 percent increase in fatalities nationwide—the biggest spike in nearly a century.