

Congestion-pricing positives outweigh negatives

By Michael R. Brown

Free freeways are a tradition that I love. Like anyone, I do not want to begin paying for something I have always perceived as free. However, I recently participated in research on behalf of the Wasatch Front Regional Council that convinced me there will be specific locations where the positive aspects of congestion pricing will massively outweigh the negatives.

The research revealed that if we were to attempt to eliminate all 2030 freeway congestion on the Wasatch Front only by constructing more and wider freeways, it would cost more than \$16 billion in today's dollars and push portions of I-15 to nine lanes each direction in spite of alternative freeways, which would also end up larger than the current space available.

Freeway congestion is like a cancer that has plagued most large cities before us. Wasn't the solution obvious? They thought so – more and wider freeways! Yet we observe that cities who adopted this strategy indirectly encouraged millions of their next residents to adopt far-flung lifestyles that depend on the free freeways. Thus the cancer returns with a vengeance when freeways can no longer be widened, as is quickly becoming the case on I-15 in Salt Lake County just seven years after completion.

Increasing freeway space is important to a growing city. However, supply alone is like a drug that delays the progression of cancer, but you still die young. If we add congestion pricing to our drug cocktail, then the free market kicks in. Those with attractive alternatives are motivated to utilize them. Those who need the speed for this particular trip can purchase a scarce resource, a 5 p.m. slot on I-15, and are guaranteed high speeds in return. Nobody "wants" the pain of chemotherapy. But most who have cancer want a permanent solution, painful as it may be, and not just something that delays the inevitable.

Congestion pricing is very different than tolls. The purpose of tolls is to provide revenue to pay off construction bonds. You pay even when there is no congestion. It can amount to unfair taxation if applied to a small locale that also pays taxes for roads that others use for free. The purpose of congestion pricing is primarily to ensure the freeways do not fall below 60 mph. At times or places where that wouldn't be an issue, then the price can be free.

Consider my "Top 10" advantages of congestion pricing: (10) More use of off-peak capacity; (9) Increased transit usage; (8) Increased capacity, since freeways have only 70 percent as much throughput when moving slow as when moving fast; (7) Reduction of side-street spill-over. When efficiency is back to 100 percent, those avoiding freeways due to price are fewer than those flocking back to it because it can finally carry them; (6) Point A becomes closer to point B, as the next million residents can save money if they adopt less far-flung lifestyles; (5) Fuel is saved, air quality improved and carbon dioxide reduced; (4) Economic competitiveness: Since time is money, businesses spending up to \$100 per hour for drivers and equipment can recover thousands of dollars worth of time; (3) "Tragedy of commons," which occurs when a resource is over-exploited because individuals saw no personal advantage to conserve (think Hummer), is avoided; (2) Generates revenue. Though not the primary purpose, it does so nonetheless. This helps offset the need to raise fuel taxes to keep up with construction inflation. It also targets those who contribute to congestion better than a fuel or sales tax.

And finally, No. 1 — More productivity, more soccer, more lives saved. In the end, it's about life. Are we willing to squander time worth \$10, \$50, or \$100 per hour? Will we miss seeing a child's game-winning point? Will we risk death because emergency help was delayed by crucial minutes, all so we could save \$2 — which ends up wasted anyway just in fuel inefficiency.

If we are to avoid the fate of cities before us, our next freeway construction projects must plan for an ultimate conversion to congestion pricing. If not, our children will decide between expensive retrofits to accommodate congestion pricing, or a "big dig" project to create an 18-lane I-15.

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If you would like more information or a presentation on the positive and negative attributes of Congestion Pricing, please contact Mike Brown at 801-860-2409, or at mbrown@metroanalytics.com.