THE GOOD CITY: TRAFFIC TRANSCRIPT

March 10, 2025

CLAIRE FISHER: [00:00:00] Ah yes, the dulcet sounds of gridlock. Hello and welcome to The Good City, a podcast from the Cornell Mui Ho Center for Cities in the College of Architecture, Art, and Planning at Cornell University. I'm Claire Fisher, the program assistant at the center, and today we're talking about traffic.

It's a daily headache for millions and a multi billion dollar problem for cities worldwide. It fuels stress, eats away at our time, and is a major source of greenhouse gas emissions. Chances are, you've felt the impacts of traffic directly, maybe even daily, whether stuck in gridlock or looking for alternate routes to avoid delays. But traffic congestion isn't just an individual inconvenience. It cost the U.S. $74 billion last year in lost time, and it also contributes to an average of 27 percent of all air pollution across cities globally.[1]

And unfortunately, traffic congestion is only getting worse. According to the navigation and [00:01:00] GPS company TomTom, traffic increased in just about every American city last year [2] — and it's a very similar story in cities worldwide, from Dubai to London to Lagos.

For decades, transportation experts and city officials around the world have sought solutions to this sprawling issue caused by a combination of surging urban populations, outdated and inefficient city planning, a heavy reliance on personal vehicles, and inadequate transportation infrastructure.

In this episode, we dive into the complexities of traffic: why it happens, how it affects cities, and what can be done to manage it.

I spoke with Professor Nicholas Klein from Cornell University and Anshul Mishra, Member Secretary of the Chennai Metropolitan Development Authority to hear about traffic challenges and solutions from two very different parts of the world.

So Nick, what causes traffic in the first place?

NICK KLEIN: Traffic congestion [00:02:00] is simply a function of too much demand for too little supply, right? So it's essentially when there's a lot of people who wanna be in the same place and access the same thing. It's why there's a long line for coffee in the morning at the coffee shop. It's why the buses are crowded in the morning, right? There's a lot of people who are trying to use the same space, and the same thing is true when we're looking at automobiles.

And it happens often and regularly in cities because there are lots of things that we do that are regular and have schedules and times. And so often, we see traffic congestion peaking in the mornings and in the evenings when a lot of people are trying to get to it from work. It is not the only time we see traffic congestion, right? When there's a big sporting event or a concert, and then there's also sort of unexpected traffic or unplanned traffic from events like a car crash or even construction, which can be either viewed as expected or unexpected, depending on whether you know about it happening or not.

CF: Is there any [00:03:00] variation in how different types of cities attempt to address traffic?

NK: I don't think it falls neatly into certain lines. We've seen some cities adopting things like congestion pricing, where they charge vehicles a certain amount of money, and that may vary by time or by day, to enter a congested area.

Other cities like Paris have been thinking about reshaping the streets and the use of streets and the capacity there, sort of to make it less easy to get around by car and easy to get around by walking, bicycle, transit.

And other cities are investing in expanding capacity of roads in the false belief that that might address traffic congestion.

CF: Yeah, could you go a little more into that point because I think a lot of people do have that mentality of 'Well, if there's a lot of traffic, let's just add another lane or two and that'll solve the problem.'

NK: I mean, I think it is an understandable belief to feel that maybe we can address traffic congestion.

Unfortunately, the [00:04:00] amount of travel is not a fixed amount, right? We're saying, okay, it'll be easier to travel, travel times will go down. And that

will attract more people who — maybe they traveled at different times, and so they left early in the morning to avoid the traffic congestion — maybe they took a different route, or maybe they used to take the bus or the train or biked or walked and now they're, they're driving. Or maybe they carpooled and now they're driving their own car. And other people maybe just are shifting to making additional trips because of this extra capacity. And so people move and relocate and change their travel behavior. And this is what transportation planners call induced demand or induced travel: this idea that expanding roadway capacity leads to greater travel to more travel.

And so because of that, you may see in the short term that traffic congestion is decreased, but over time, that capacity is eaten up and you sort of end up back where you were in an equilibrium state where you've spent hundreds of million dollars, maybe a billion dollars, expanding the roadway, and you still [00:05:00] have traffic congestion.

CF: When we looked at ways that cities tend to try and "fix" traffic congestion, are there any specific efforts that you've seen to be particularly successful or unsuccessful?

NK: Expanding highways is throwing good money after bad. It is not going to work. It is not going to address congestion in the long term.

There are other approaches that you can do. So some cities, by sheer inertia, don't do anything. And that is a policy. You can say, okay, congestion exists. Whether people think of it as a policy they're actively doing or not is another question, but the idea is that congestion is just a way to regulate the demand for a limited supply of road space, and so people just wait. And that is one approach, maybe not one that planners actively choose.

Other approaches are to invest in public transit and alternatives to driving. I think that cities should invest in public transit and other [00:06:00] alternatives. A small number of people who choose to go later, to take other modes, to defer those trips, could have a big effect on traffic congestion. And from a city perspective, they can use it to raise revenue, which can be used for all sorts of things, and sort of how that revenue is used is a dicey question and has big implications for the equity and the effectiveness of these policies.

Another option is to charge people more for driving, and that is usually seen as the other alternative, and that tends to work well and has been proven in city

after city that if you charge drivers more to use a congested space, they consume less of it.

CF: And speaking of charging drivers to use congested spaces, one of the most successful traffic interventions in recent years has been congestion pricing, where cities charge vehicles more to travel through high traffic areas during peak travel times.

Congestion pricing policies have been around [00:07:00] since the 1970s in London, Stockholm and cities across Singapore.[3] Yet the policy has been slow to take off in other countries, facing initial public and political skepticism and resistance. However, these cities have managed to reduce traffic in a meaningful way. And at the same time, they've raised millions of dollars as a direct result of congestion pricing.

When Stockholm passed a pilot congestion pricing program in 2006, the city saw traffic decline by over 30 percent. And in the following decade, Stockholm's [00:07:30] population increased by 10 percent, yet the city's traffic level was reduced by 22 percent.[4]

Similarly, after London implemented congestion pricing in 2003, traffic dropped an average of 30 percent, and the city saw an increase in transit ridership, air quality and public support for congestion pricing.[5]

In early 2025, New York City became the first city in the U.S. to implement congestion pricing, six years after its approval by state lawmakers in 2019.[6] [00:08:00]

As of January 5th, 2025, drivers have been charged $9 when entering the Central Business District in Manhattan. In an effort to promote goodwill towards congestion pricing, the New York City Metropolitan Transportation Authority cited the 117 hours a year per person wasted sitting in gridlock, the $20 billion a year in wasted time and lost productivity, and the 7.1 mile an hour average speed of travel in the Manhattan Central Business District.[6]

However, at the time of this recording, [00:08:30] President Donald Trump has withdrawn support for the program. U.S. Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy claimed that congestion pricing was detrimental to working class Americans and small business owners.[7]

New York Governor Kathy Hochul made a case at the White House for preserving congestion pricing, citing that in its first week of implementation, the program resulted in a 7.5 percent decrease of traffic into Manhattan and generated $48.6 million, revenue intended to be used to improve the region's outdated and failing [00:09:00] mass transit system.

As of March 1st, 2025, it's likely that the fate of congestion pricing in New York City will be decided in the precinct courts.[8]

Back when it looked like congestion pricing was set to move forward without any roadblocks, I asked Professor Klein, "why New York City?"

NK: Many people, policymakers, politicians, academics, have been looking into and evaluating the notion of implementing congestion pricing in New York City for several decades. New York City is a prime place to do this because most of the people — almost all the people who drive into New York City for work are affluent. Most people who commute to New York City take transit or bike or walk. The share of drivers is very small. The options to not drive are very great. People already pay a lot in tolls and in parking and in other costs to drive into Manhattan, [00:10:00] right? The people who are doing that, almost all of them have other options.

In addition, the policies for New York City were very clear about offering discounts to low income drivers, who again, make up a very small share of the people who drive into Manhattan.

We have to look at things more holistically when it comes to transportation and then think about the broader issues. I mean, especially in congestion pricing in New York City, it's such a clear win from a policy perspective to charge drivers more and use that money to fund public transportation. Especially when drivers tend to be more affluent than transit riders. So it is a way to redistribute that money and also a way to invest in more environmentally friendly modes of transportation.

CF: In India, the conversation around congestion pricing is slowly gaining traction. India's urban centers often experience some of the worst traffic delays in the world. The country faces [00:11:00] unique challenges: highly diverse commuter populations, fragmented transportation systems, and streets that are shared by cars, buses, two wheelers and even pedestrians.

According to a 2023 report, the average Indian employee spent 59 minutes commuting just one way to work.[9] Though travel distances have remained mostly unchanged across the country, travel times have increased in almost every major city in India since 2020.[10] Cities like Delhi and Mumbai both saw increases of 15 percent each, while [00:11:30] **the city of Chennai saw an increase of almost 30 percent.[10]**

Like New York City, Delhi currently plans to charge vehicles entering the city at designated points during morning and evening peak hours.[11]

Chennai, India's fifth most populated city with a metropolitan population of over 12 million, is also navigating these challenges. It has not yet adopted congestion pricing, but the idea has surfaced in policy discussions as one of several tools to address the city's growing traffic woes.[12]

The Chennai Metropolitan Development [00:12:00] **Authority, CMDA, or "cumda", has been actively working to address these issues, striving to create a vision for seamless mobility through an integrated, sustainable, and resilient transportation ecosystem. Since 1976, the city has seen three major development plans designed to enhance its infrastructure and address its most complex urban challenges, including traffic congestion.[13]**

Next, we'll hear from Anshul Mishra, member secretary of the Chennai Metropolitan Development Authority, for more on traffic congestion in the city of Chennai.

So, Anshul, thank you very much for coming on the podcast. Could you describe generally the problem that the Comprehensive Mobility Plan and the Master Plan are trying to address in terms of traffic congestion in the city of Chennai?

ANSHUL MISHRA: As any other city in India, Chennai is also in a low and medium density urban sprawl. And we all know what urban sprawl does to a city — the city expands outwards, and that leads to dependence [00:13:00] on private vehicles. And in general, there is absence of robust public transport systems in Indian cities, particularly so in Chennai also.

That leads to this kind of urbanization process where we see huge traffic congestion in the entire metropolitan area because people need to commute

every day from their houses to the workplaces. And invariably people come to the core areas for economic opportunities or jobs, etc.

The kind of management of traffic we have right now, it's all conventional, you know, signal-based system, which leads to queuing up of vehicles, honking, [a] lot of air pollution, and it ultimately leads to, you know, slow moving traffic, gridlock during the peak hours, and increased trip length and increased transportation costs. So these are the challenges which Chennai city is facing.

CF: In the time that you've been working on the master plan and specifically in relation to traffic, have you seen [00:14:00] a shift in the issue over the years as both the CMDA has transformed and the area itself that you're working in has changed?

AM: Over the years, what has happened in Chennai, and I'm sure in other cities also in India, is that there has been a modal shift in terms of commutation. So people used to commute more using the public transport and in Chennai, it was a bus system, which is operating very efficiently. But over the years, with more urbanization and more people coming in, people mostly shifted to private vehicles and the share of public transport, most particularly the buses, went down drastically, and cars and two wheelers have gone up. There [are] still some gaps there in terms of multimodal integration. Once that is done, probably the shift will happen towards public transportation.

And given that we are working on the transit-oriented development, the metro rail has come in. And it has slowly started picking up now. Once we start working on the land use planning and [00:15:00] incentivizing developers to produce more housing, more build up area along the transit corridors, I think things will change positively.

CF: Do you see traffic as more of an infrastructure problem, or sort of a people behavior problem, or is it really both?

AM: It may be a combination of all of it. If we don't understand how people behave in the city, and why do they come to the city, and why do they need to travel, we might be always doing the catch up game.

If you look at the behavioral point of view, people are going to come in, [00:15:30] and they're going to need to travel to their workplace, or for recreation, or entertainment, and all that. And we need to provide for that, right?

Now the question before a planner is, where do we provide that? And if you get that right, I think half of your problem is solved. You can actually nudge people to use public transport system, you can nudge people to pick up walking and cycling and all that.

CF: You had begun to mention some initiatives that the city and CMDA have been involved in. Are there any that are encouraging specifically, uh, human behavior [00:16:00] changes?

AM: Basically, this is a work in progress, nudging people towards better traffic discipline or road discipline is definitely one important aspect of it. Changing that behavior, right? It requires a huge effort.

Enforcement is another issue. The enforcement has not been very popular, but slowly they have started and I know in one place in Andhranagar, they're using cameras. And they are sending the fines to their homes, which is causing a lot of changes in behavior. There is some hesitation, which will take time to go.

Regarding lane discipline, I myself, uh, [have] been discussing with [the] traffic police chief about implementing this, because people just change the lane without giving indicators.

Another important thing which we are doing is to work with the regional transport offices where they give licenses. Now, you know how difficult it is to get a driving license in [the] U.S. It is very easy to get in India. I visited some of these transport offices where they do this testing. Now these testings are rudimentary. The rules and regulations and the entire [00:17:00] thing is not tested, so that requires another fundamental change.

Besides that, you know, small, small changes like the bus stop, which is constructed on Indian roads, is not at all friendly for a bus to stop there. Most of the time, vehicles would be parked there and [a] bus would come and stand on the road, not in the bus bay. So that is another challenge. So that also needs a lot of intervention. We have been speaking to the bus transport corporations.

So all of these smaller interventions have started, and I'm sure in the next two, three, four years, we will see some very positive results.

CF: Part of our podcast involves taking actions across scales to combat these really large issues. Do you have suggestions for how both cities and individuals

can work to take steps towards things similar to what CMDA and the city of Chennai have been doing?

AM: So if I have to say immediate short-term solutions, you have to manage the right of way. You have to ensure that there is enough space for the vehicles to move.

Now, traditionally, [00:18:00] when more cars and more two wheelers are coming on the road, the immediate response is to provide more roads, right? But that doesn't serve the purpose because if you provide more roads and more flyovers, more cars will come in.

So to handle that, we have to manage the existing right of way. We have to rationalize the bus routes. We have to manage the traffic junctions. We have to ensure that pedestrian crossings become very smooth and hassle-free. So that makes life easy for commuters.

Another important thing is that the cities in India, there's a context in which we need to understand the whole thing. Sometimes individuals have that context, which we miss when we do the larger planning. So, those micro-level interventions sometimes become a key to overall planning. I think traffic police is one which engages with the people and individuals and local communities for awareness creation.

From a long-term planning perspective for Chennai Metropolitan [00:19:00] Area or for any city for that matter, we need to manage the travel demand. That requires thinking in terms of how to ensure that most of the people live along the transit corridors, how to ensure that most of the people use transit corridors. For that, we need to develop something called transit-oriented development and [a] compact city program, basically a densification along the transit corridors — we have submitted that proposal to government and it is under consideration. This kind of approach would help and we are proposing a very comprehensive framework for travel demand management.

CF: Well, Anshul, this has been really nice to talk to you about traffic in Chennai. Um, thank you again for taking the time to talk to us.

AM: Thank you Claire, thank you so much.

CF: Nick, would you say that it's unrealistic to expect that we can solve traffic congestion? And do you have anything you think is a more realistic expectation for both cities and urban commuters to have as they continue to deal with traffic?

NK: My views are a little bit different than most [00:20:00] people, that I don't think congestion is inherently a problem. It is, again, just how we're regulating this space and this, this use of this infrastructure.

And when we frame traffic congestion as a problem, it sets up the idea that we should be trying to solve that problem, right? That solving traffic congestion is the thing that transportation planners should be working towards. I mean, the idea that if you're traveling somewhere like Nairobi or New York City or London or Paris, and that you are expecting to be able to get in the car and drive and never experience delay because there are other people around in these huge urban conglomerations is a ridiculous notion. You can't expect to go to Times Square and not see other people, and if you did, you might suspect that that actually is a sign of a problem.

But I think it's useful to remember that perceptions about traffic congestion are context-dependent. And that what seems like "bad traffic" or [00:21:00] horrible traffic congestion in one place might not seem so bad elsewhere. And if New York City had the traffic congestion of Ithaca, they would think that they had solved traffic congestion.

Again, the idea and the thing for transportation planners that I think they should be focusing on is using and thinking about transportation as enabling access to opportunities and destinations, not as customer service where we're trying to make it so that drivers can do whatever they want, wherever they want, and never have to feel any disturbances.

But I think it also points to opportunities for transportation planners and academics to think about how can we reframe these ideas and think about the goals of transportation planning and the goals in planning in general about allowing and showing how people can live in cities and suburbs and rural areas and get around and what kinds of problems we're really trying to solve.

CF: Yeah. I think that's a [00:22:00] really interesting angle that I hadn't really come across before. Just the idea that traffic isn't necessarily a bad thing — like it has other meanings and if you look at it a little closer, like, well, there is

traffic because a lot of people want to be in this area and that, you know, why is that? What does that mean? I think it's probably a benefit in some ways to have traffic because it means that you have a lot of jobs or, you know, desirable events and services and venues that people are trying to access routinely.

NK: Yeah, and we see time and again when there's economic recession, traffic congestion goes down. And I don't think that's how we want to solve this traffic condition problem. Traffic conditions exist when we have vibrancy. Like when we have bustling communities and economic success.

CF: When we talk about the role of traffic planners, what are some of the main considerations to be taken into account?

NK: Yeah, so, in transportation planning, there has been a shift in the past 10, 15, 20 years, thinking about mobility, which we think [00:23:00] of as how far can you get; towards accessibility — thinking about how many things can you access in a certain amount of time, right? And so, it doesn't really matter to me how many miles you can go in 30 minutes if there's nothing there. What matters is how many things you can access in 30 minutes by a variety of modes.

Transportation infrastructure is the interaction of land use and transportation infrastructure and services that create accessibility. If we think about only mobility — how far can you go — we're really only thinking about the transportation side. We're only thinking about the distances and speeds you can travel. Not about the land use component of what's there.

And so when we think about these things together, you know, transportation planners have to be thinking about working with other planners and thinking about what is the zoning there? What kind of opportunities are there? And thinking about those things in conjunction. [00:24:00]

CF: Yeah, super interesting. Thank you so much for talking to us again about traffic.

NK: No problem.

CF: I really appreciate it.

That's our episode. Thank you for listening. Special thanks to our guests. Associate Professor Nick Klein and Anshul Mishra of the Chennai

Metropolitan Development Authority. The Good City is produced and directed by Claire Fisher, with editing and research from Meher Bhatia. You can find links to resources and research in the show notes, [00:24:30] as well as a transcript.

If you have a suggestion for a future episode, we'd love to hear from you, so please send us an email at centerforcities@cornell.edu.

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Chennai Master Plan - https://www.cmdachennai.gov.in/smp_main.html

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[3] New York City has just implemented congestion pricing on cars. Is a big city in Canada next? | CBC News

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[5] Congestion Pricing Lessons from London and Stockholm | Vital City

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[7] Hochul says she made a case to Trump for NYC's congestion pricing, yet predicts courts will decide | AP News

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[9] An average Indian spent 59 minutes to commute one way to work in 2023: Report | The Economic Times

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