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Implementation of Congestion Pricing in the United States

With city infrastructure looking identical to fifty years ago and a population boom of three billion people, traffic is inevitable. The proposed solution by several cities is congestion taxation which addresses the lack of mobility within high-demand areas. Congestion pricing design is to tax an individual driving on a desired road. Then, the price is adjusted to utilize a particular road depending on the usage and congestion level: more traffic will result in a higher congestion price.

The implementation of congestion pricing is developing within several countries. These countries found an increase in generating revenue and a change in public behavior. However, the forthcoming findings conclude a negative connotation associated with congestion pricing. Areas where congestion pricing was implemented serve to keep motorists out. London's city center, for example, was not built to accommodate such dense traffic. Imposing such taxes to enter the city center forces the driver to decide the opportunity cost of entering.

Overall, experiences with congestion pricing hold great disinclination demonstrated by the government. Although the implementation of congestion pricing does resolve the problem, it shifts the problem. As the population continues to increase, the change in mobilization by citizens will again be in concern with capacity limits. These taxes also hold no accountability for those in the lower class who cannot pay such tolls, disproportionately disadvantaging that class. Additionally, the ability to drive already comes with many taxes. To tax a commodity due to governmental failure is a scapegoat. The government is responsible for creating feasible transit

plans and providing public transport, not implementing more taxes.

The idea of congestion taxes is to disincentivize mobility in a particular area. Such taxes could result from heavy traffic, and the infrastructure of such areas can not meet growing capacity. Implementing congestion taxes correlates with incentivizing public transportation and personal non-vehicular transport, such as bikes.

In 2015, the Los Angeles mayor, Eric Garcetti, proposed a new infrastructure bill that would shrink or remove lanes to create new bike lanes. The mayor and the city council believed that citizens would utilize alternative transportation as roads will become further congested. Fear for endless gridlock rose, and public backlash was monumental. Many local activists that have helped in campaigns like “Fix the City” noticed a substantive error about mobility. The lack of transportation offered by the city fails to assist citizen needs. With the city’s non-responsiveness to upgrade public transport, citizens wondered “what are [we] going to do, take two hours on a bus? They have not given us other options” (O’Sullivan). Endless lines and everlasting delays will corrupt a working society.

In a recent case study in New York City, Mayor de Blasio previously implemented the same infrastructure plan that Los Angeles City has proposed. The findings indicated that “the NYPD has fallen down in stopping drivers from blocking the box at intersections and double-parking. No one will change [the people of Manhattan’s] behavior when no [government agency] is holding them accountable” (Nicole). Hypothetically, if the actions of New Yorkers translated to those living in Los Angeles, then the even smaller roads would be heavily congested. New York City has some of the best public transport systems, and the city has three and a half times the amount of uniformed officers compared to Los Angeles. However, with civilian disobedience and non-enforcement of laws, the city will remain in gridlock. No new

forms of public transportation and an inequitable substantive tax have made workers realize the cost-benefit of working. People will not find it beneficial to consume, which will hurt the economy, forcing the populated city to lose a very important demographic.

Congestion pricing can add a surplus of adverse effects to any urbanized city. For example, before implementing congestion taxes in London's city center, it was booming with all kinds of moving activity; now, the city center lay dormant with only a few vehicles willing to pay the expensive tax. The idea was to remove some congestion, but the implementation removed the vibrancy and community that make urban areas unique.

Back in 2019, when New York City implemented the congestion tax below 60th St., the area nearly became eradicated of life. The city was even attempting to revive certain districts (Lawler). Unfortunately, an area like midtown Manhattan, which used to be thriving with life, has become a shell of what it used to be. Office buildings, stores, and apartments are now being left empty, and with the addition of road taxes, this city may be unrevivable. More than 220,000 people left New York for one main reason, the state as a whole is frankly too expensive (Gelinas). Congestion taxes sealed the deal. Beatrice Carre said "drivers who have to pay the toll were firmly opposed. I commute into the city from Queens and I'm paying for tolls already. It's enough. We're paying enough," Ms. Carre, later on, was one of those that left New York City. Even when cities have greater robust public transport systems in place, some spots within the city are not adequately equated, thus requiring vehicle travel.

Regions with high usage also may see an increase in lanes. Acting upon usage is known as induced demand. This theory has a simple principle: a higher capacity has a higher demand. Consistently building into capacity is no longer feasible. Urbanized areas no longer have the space for two extra lanes. Transportation associations utilized all available space, and Senate Bill

957 prohibits the construction of general-purpose lanes and will begin tolling high-occupancy vehicle (HOV) lanes by 2025. Public transportation is now a necessity for many urbanized areas.

When viewing how congestion pricing affects one's mobility through transportation, it is evident that urbanized areas have yet to prepare for such change. Public transportation is not fully implemented in all areas within an urbanized environment. Many steps must happen before implementing congestion pricing. If implemented incorrectly, similar results will appear like New York City. The solution to congestion belongs to the government, specifically transportation agencies. By helping resolve this problematic issue, at a bare minimum, it provides multiple forms of transportation to mobilize the city to allow the citizens to no longer need their vehicle.

The debate regarding congestion pricing levies many arguments, yet one primary concern has yet to be adequately addressed. Congestion pricing is a flat rate offered to any user entering a specific region. With that in mind, the poorest and wealthiest people share the same flat tax, making it a regressive tax and:

> In many cases, congestion pricing most negatively affects the marginalized and lowest income neighborhoods in a city because they often live furthest from downtown and may not have reliable or convenient public transportation. If these individuals do not have an alternative to driving, they cannot avoid the congestion fee that their wealthier counterparts who live closer to the city center can. (Parks)

Many workers within urban environments may not afford such expensive housing, forcing them to live on the city's outskirts or even in neighboring cities. Their commute to work helps make the city economically thrive, yet if congestion pricing gets implemented, the tax would cost nearly two hours worth of work on a minimum wage job.

Likewise, since congestion pricing is a regressive tax, the design is to discourage people

from using certain roads or enter certain regions, this act will "hurt businesses because public transit may not be an option for some people. If they are forced to pay more to use their own vehicles, then they may choose not to go into those areas at all and instead shop elsewhere," ultimately losing a once-thriving company (Tardi, 12). A stationery business will not be the only form of company suffering. Companies like Uber, Lyft, Doordash, etc already have expensive fees. The consumer will have to pay exponentially more. Small businesses that specialize in transport in urban settings will suffer.

The debate on congestion pricing zones draws explicitly undue attention to those who live within the specified zone. Obviously, "[those who live in the congested zones] feel like [they are] being discriminated against," because, for most, those that reside in that region previously lived there without any taxation (Tardi, 8). Those who already live within that bubble cannot avoid such fines. Citizens living within the bracketed congestion pricing zone attended several committee hearings regarding congestion pricing and mentioned that "paying this fee every day will also be a greater financial burden. This is unjust and any congestion pricing policy should contain provisions specifying that a certain percentage of the fees levied should be directed to communities where the median income falls within the bottom [three] income brackets," to ensure congestion pricing is as equitable as possible (Parks). In New York City, once congestion pricing was implemented, the decision over who deserved exemptions was the next priority due to public demand.

With fighting over who deserves what, the government first believed that government employees should not pay the tax even though government vehicles were already exempt. The public was outraged. It appeared as if congestion pricing turned into a money grab by the government. Many officials sequestered themselves when voting on specific initiatives to

provide exceptions to those either entirely within the congestion-priced bubble or those under a specific income bracket. This occurred repetitively until the initiative was removed from the docket. Councilman Will O'Neil of Newport Beach, District 2, is the sitting director of the Transportation Corridor Agency formerly known as the San Joaquin Hills toll roads. He acknowledges that if housing was provided in a specific area and the government decided to implement congestion pricing, those inhabitants shall not be punished for an infrastructure error caused by the government.

Before any government decides to implement a congestion tax, the conversations of what is equitable must come first. Whether or not to allow and who to provide exemptions too is very important. Equity should not come last when trying to help create a fair playing field. Regardless, congestion pricing promotes a money grab mentality by the government and demonstrates various errors within promoting equity. Whether extreme change or dismantling the concept, a social cost is unjustified to implement a regressive tax.

In the United States, the average person pays approximately 15% of their income to the government. As well, the government implements excess taxes along with all transportation utilities. As a result, traffic agencies responsible for creating roads and public transport receive a substantive budget from county, state, and federal governments. As well, these agencies are granted a ridiculous excess amount of money. Understanding whether or not the extra tax is a money grab, an actual necessity for the transportation agency, or only deter people from using a specified region or road is to be determined once the next budget is produced and published.

Politicians often refer to London as the origin of success for congestion pricing, yet London's intention and budgeting are typically not addressed when using such a city as a viable rationale. In London, during the “first 10 years that the charge was in effect, they levied £2.6

billion and invested half of this in public transport, road and bridge improvement, and walking and cycling initiatives," and the remaining half went unknown (Lawler). After generating an absurd amount of money targeted only to improve congestion and infrastructure, it is difficult not to question where the remaining taxes generated went. When leading officials of the congestion pricing initiative were questioned, only vague or non-responsive answers were provided. When viewing the budget plan, 1.3 billion pounds was labeled as "miscellaneous" from the extra expenditure. As one of the greatest explanations for how successful congestion pricing was and a leader in implementing such an idea, London appears to have some significant holes in its tax revenue. It appears that either the government agency did not know what to do with the extra expenditure or they used the extra budget misguidedly. This would not be an ideal way of representing congestion pricing and its social benefits.

Recently, the United States Congress has passed a $1 trillion infrastructure plan designed to improve the current roads, help establish bridges, and create new transportation systems. A majority reason why each state representative approved such a budget was to help alleviate dense traffic. Not by implementing a newer tax. Councilman Will O'Neil believes that representatives only supported such a plan because their districts appeared to benefit the most, not in the infrastructure aspect, but their own pockets and the pockets of the local construction agencies. Regardless, Councilman Will O'Neil knows that this infrastructure deal "Build Back Better" may offer real results rather than a new tax.

It is concerning to think about what will not be taxed in the future. Already the roads in the United States are not free. One may not be charged with utilizing such features in plain sight, but no one "can call roads free, what about gas taxes and registration fees," those are all taxes too (Manville). With the various taxes placed on drivers to even use their vehicle, nothing is free.

That registration tax is based on the car model. However, the main party that receives unduly bias due to the inability to tax all personal vehicle users are electric car owners. Electric car owners are incentivized with HOV single rider passes and do not have to pay the gas tax. This is just another example of how the rich get away with more money. An average income person can not afford such an expensive vehicle. The current tax foundations are clear that further actions on implementing congestion pricing are both redundant and inequitable.

A significant counterpart before implementing congestion pricing is creating tolls. Tolls are specified lanes that allow drivers to determine their best option of getting to their desired locations. Tolls tend to travel at significantly higher speeds than general-purpose lanes. Such solutions to congestion have appeared mainly on major freeways or have designated toll road highways with a close alternative that is free in the United States.

The implementation of congestion pricing intends to keep motorists out. This entails an alternative form of transportation. Unfortunately, not every city, county, or state is equipped with such resources to build long hauling transportation for their citizens, yet most major highways are constantly congested. Freeways are now “involving tolls [which] offer a better solution,” still promoting general purpose lanes (Federal Highway Administration). By not removing general-purpose lanes but creating new-tolled lanes, this offers the user a choice: pay a toll to use the new lane or use the congested road at no cost. Like when using a private entity app: there are surge charges, but the consumer does not personally have to go with that company. Tolls create a further equitable option “even when priced lanes are seen to be used more heavily by high-income users than by low-income users, a broad spectrum of income groups still express approval of the projects (as documented later in this primer) because they are given the choice of choosing the tolled route, an alternative free route, or a different transportation mode” (Federal

Highway Administration). States like California have implemented similar concepts on major freeways. If a person has a car holding two or more people in it, they can use the express lane, pay a tax, or use a general-purpose lane. California has implemented both concepts: one being the CSR 91 freeway with HOV and HOT lanes and the second being the 73 toll road and 405 freeway run parallel to one another resulting in both roads merging.

In areas beginning to see higher congestion, like Kings County in Washington, the city administered a poll to all residing citizens on what preference the people would desire. With a 73% response rate varying of all socioeconomic status and demographics, 86% of all households preferred the option of adding a new-tolled lane or building a new faster-designated toll road (Federal Highway Administration: Washing Department). By providing an option, citizens will not be forced to pay for guilt by association crime. Statistically, rush hour is known as gridlock traffic. Punishing people for working is unjust, but offering the option to pay a fine allows choice.

In 1999, the Orange County Transportation Agency (OCTA) concluded that 27.4% of drivers used the toll lanes on California State Route (CSR) 91. In 2021, the OCTA concluded that 19.8% of drivers used the HOV toll lanes on CSR 91. Therefore, by integrating HOV lanes and removing general-purpose lanes to build tolls, traffic has heavily increased. Additionally, by altering HOV lanes into high-occupancy toll (HOT) lanes, the OCTA concluded that SR 91 users would no longer use that HOV lane if turned into a tolled high-occupancy lane, pushing those into the general-purpose lane resulting in congestion. If tolls are implemented, reinstating general-purpose HOV lanes and then tolled lanes will make highways much more efficient.

Tolls benefit the community by eliminating the possibility of a major “loser” at play (Parry). With the addition of tolls, the money generated should first be to repay the transportation

agency for the construction of the road. Then the newly generated money could be cut and some portion will go toward “[compensating] those who might otherwise consider themselves [lower class]” (James). The idea of the government is to serve the public; we all suffer from congestion. A more uncomplicated benefit before implementing congestion taxes is tolling. To offer an option and benefit the community.

Congestion pricing inherently solves the problem. People are deterred from using high-demand roads at peak hours. Environmentally, idling cars emit 30 million tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere (US Department of Energy: FWHA). Congestion pricing removes gridlock traffic removing a lot of idling cars. As well, congestion pricing needs no new addition of infrastructure. The surplus generated by such taxes can be directed to practically any under-funded governmental program. Such opportunities are not crossed regularly, by utilizing congestion pricing equitably drivers will pay for the externalities, such as the deterioration of roads, intersection light, and lane markers. Business operating ground transportation will see a significant increase in arrival times and revenue. By being able to complete transportations faster, the business may operate more transportations increasing revenue. Congestion pricing may not be the desirable option, but it solves the problem.

In the introduction, the idea of implementing congestion pricing was introduced. Based on the information in this essay, it is plausible to believe that congestion taxes mitigates heavy traffic by shifting blame from infrastructural errors to drivers. These failed transit infrastructure plans are the result of poor government communication and planning. Thus diverting the problem to citizens with no assistance is not resolving the key issue.

Recent studies have made a compelling argument that the implementation of congestion taxes is not feasible within the United States due to the nation's infrastructure. London’s directive

was to keep vehicles outside the city center, New York City's directive targeted anyone below 60th street, approximately a quarter of a million people would pay a congested price daily. The difference is substantive. Implementing congestion pricing in the United States would not alleviate the congestion, its implementation would divert the traffic to outside the taxed zone or onto side streets. If ever implemented, the government must be responsible for providing adequate transport for the congested-priced zone, lower class citizens must be offered some form of exemption, taxes must be restructured to not be inequitable, and the consideration of tolls must happen before implementing congestion taxes.

Two groups are heavily affected with the implementation of congestion taxes. Those in the lower income class could have devastating consequences if such tax is implemented. As well, people living inside the congestion zone will be disproportionately affected. Both parties should advocate for alternative solutions to congestion. Possible solutions are advocating for greater road infrastructure that are designated for tolled lanes. This opportunity promotes citizens to have a choice on whether to have a faster commute or deal with gridlock traffic. As well, building a well developed public transportation system. By integrating such ideas, congestion could be reduced by nearly 26%, relative average of tolled lanes used nationwide (National Transport Authority). Solutions are present, utilizing them is the next step.

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