
Congestion Pricing: The Road to the Surveillance State

BY BECKY AKERS

To combat the rush-hour traffic threatening Western civilization, American mayors are flocking to “congestion pricing.” They’re not alone: rulers worldwide love this scheme because it combines yet another automotive tax with surveillance cameras at every intersection.

The theory fueling congestion pricing is the one spanning our automotive lives: driving is a “privilege” government dispenses. Driving at rush hour is an even bigger privilege. So far, the state has granted this privilege for free (the dozens of highway, gas, sales, license, and car taxes we pay don’t count). But the gravy train is ending. There’s no reason we should expect to drive cars we’ve bought on roads we’ve paid for when everyone else does. That’s not how the market works, say politicians who’ve ridiculed, regulated, and mooched off the market their entire careers. Willfully confusing supply and demand with control and command, they insist that mere citizens who want to use the roads at rush hour will have to pay. A lot. Hopefully, that will force commuters onto mass transit, clearing the streets for the limousines of Leviathan’s anointed.

Congestion pricing does thin traffic a bit, anywhere from 13 or 17 percent (in Singapore and London, though the anti-car Transportation Alternatives claims the latter’s traffic dropped by a whopping third) to 20 percent (Stockholm). Nor is traffic the only thing congestion pricing reduces: London’s retailers report trade has also plunged 10–15 percent, shuttering 750 busi-

nesses in one year. It’s likely that neither reduction matters to the governments pushing congestion pricing. The state’s real interest lies in the cameras and cash.

London’s socialist mayor, Ken Livingstone, imposed congestion pricing on his hapless subjects in 2003. Drivers who entered “the zone between 7 a.m. and 6:30 p.m. [notice the definition of “rush hour”], except on weekends and holidays” paid about \$16 per day then; they’re billed when computers match their addresses to the “multiple images of [their] license plates” captured by “700 video cameras,” as the *New York Times* explained in 2005. The cameras have since multiplied because congestion pricing, like all government programs, continually expands. Meanwhile, “there is nowhere in London you can avoid getting photographed and recorded,” according to Yosef Sheffi. As director of the Center for Transportation and Logistics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Sheffi advocates congestion pricing for Boston. He dismisses those who object to starring in surveillance films as hopelessly outdated: “There is also fear of



Stockholm’s first toll station for congestion pricing.

Photo by Tage Olsin. Licensed under Creative Commons Attribution ShareAlike 2.0.

privacy issues. According to the CEO of Sun Microsystems, ‘You have no privacy in today’s age. Get over it.’ ” Accurate if tragic advice for Londoners, whose city has a camera watching every 55 people, the most per capita in the world.

Becky Akers (libertatem@aim.com) is a freelance writer and historian who lives in New York City.

New York City's mayor, Michael Bloomberg, longingly eyes those cameras while patronizing anyone who "think[s] this is a civil liberties issue [as] terribly unrealistic." But cameras film everything in their purview, not just license plates. They record drivers trying to beat the light, expired inspection tags—even bumper stickers and pedestrians protesting the latest government outrage.

Safer Streets?

You might think that because they also record crime, they ensure safer streets. You would be wrong. Cameras have nothing to do with safety and everything to do with surveillance. Even New York City's Council noted the disconnect between cameras and crime when considering a "local law . . . requiring that commercial shopping establishments . . . install, maintain and operate surveillance cameras in order to deter crime." The council cited the British experience with omnipresent cameras: the "10,524 CCTV [closed-circuit television] cameras in 32 London boroughs" were famously used "after the London subway bombings on July 7, 2005"—not before. "CCTV systems [may] actually have a minimal effect on preventing crime," the council added. "A British report published in 2002 found that in 14 British cities that utilized a CCTV system, the cameras had no effect on six of the cities, and that while six of these cities reported a decrease in crime, two reported an increase."

American security guru Bruce Schneier inveighs frequently against "the inefficacy of security cameras" in fighting crime. That inefficacy has become old news in Britain, yet the government refuses to cleanse the streets of its omnipresent cameras. As Surrey Health Borough councilor Ian Bell wrote in Scotland's *Sunday Herald*, "Crime's ultimate victim—that would be liberty of the person—is twice abused thanks to CCTV. . . . To be law-abiding is no longer an excuse [to be free of surveillance]." Worse, videotape is notoriously easy

Videotape is notoriously easy to manipulate, especially when the government trying to convict a man produces and stores the footage that allegedly proves his guilt.

to manipulate, especially when the government trying to convict a man produces and stores the footage that allegedly proves his guilt. All in all, perhaps it's Bloomberg, rather than those fearing his surveillance, who is "terribly unrealistic."

New York's mayor ignores not only the police state that cameras produce but also the congestion government causes. For starters, let's remember who monopolizes both the limited supply and the design of roadways with their intersections, traffic lights, and speed limits. Then add zoning laws. Segregating "business districts" from the employees and customers who rely on them, locating shops and factories at several and often dozens of miles from residential neighborhoods, is a sure route to congestion. The zoning czars in many suburbs of

Manhattan indirectly force their residents to work and shop in the city. (Zoning curses Manhattan, too, but the island's compactness helps mitigate the misery. Many New Yorkers walk or bike to work, and they can always find bookstores, groceries, and restaurants within a few blocks of home.)

Tolls rob drivers at most entrances to the island of Manhattan, backing up traffic for miles each day at morning and evening rush hours. Those fidgeting in line aren't paying to construct more lanes and diminish their delay, either; they are instead subsidizing the city's busses and subways, according to the American Automobile Association's (AAA) New York office: "One-third of the more than one billion dollars collected in tolls on MTA Bridges and Tunnels facilities is shifted to mass transit."

The tolls' amounts differ from entrance to entrance, depending on the politics of the years they were instituted. Here's the unintended consequence, as explained by Samuel I. Schwartz, a "traffic and transportation engineer" who has tried to impose congestion pricing on his fellow citizens since 1980: "[A] trucker going from Brooklyn to New Jersey faces about \$40 in tolls if he sticks with the expressways and crosses the Verrazano Bridge. But, if he chooses to creep down" local streets in both Brooklyn and Manhattan, thereby adding to

their traffic, “he faces no toll at the outbound Holland Tunnel.”

He’ll pay in lost time, however: blocking those local streets are the city’s garbage trucks. Skyscrapers with apartments by the score generate mountains of trash, and the city monopolizes its collection. Several times each week, a couple of workers slowly pitch sack after sack into the hopper while cars pile up behind them. These civil servants are never ticketed, however leisurely their pace or enormous the logjams they cause. Ditto for fire engines and other emergency vehicles on practice runs. Barreling out of their stations, they snarl traffic while their screaming sirens deafen passers-by. Thank God there aren’t nearly as many fires as there are engines shrieking down the avenues or the whole place would have burnt to the ground by now.

The city regularly closes roads for everything from 9/11 commemorations to United Nations ceremonies to “community fairs.” Taking even a single side street out of play on this densely populated island gridlocks whole neighborhoods. But the city doesn’t care because it’s raking in the revenue and publicity.

Then there are the permits for free parking the city dispenses to its employees. Not surprisingly, the permits entice their holders to “drive to work in the Manhattan central business district at just about twice the rate (27% versus 14%) of private-sector employees,” according to the Manhattan Institute.

Congestion pricing tackles none of these problems. Anyone somewhat serious about curing them would have to confront powerful unions and upset profitable apple carts—difficult, mundane, and even dangerous work that would ease much of New York’s congestion. Anyone completely serious would undertake the infinitely more difficult and dangerous work of privatizing all things automotive, including roads.

No wonder politicians prefer the drama and headlines of congestion pricing, despite its negligible effect on traffic. That’s right: congestion pricing will destroy the remnants of freedom and privacy, fundamentally

alter commuting, hinder commerce, waste enormous sums of money on its cameras while transferring even more money from drivers to the state—all for single-digit reductions in Manhattan’s traffic. The city’s “administration expects congestion pricing to decrease vehicles entering Manhattan by 6% and increase speeds within the charging zone by 7%. In other words, the traffic improvement in Manhattan would be modest.” This from the Manhattan Institute, a conservative think-tank and one of congestion pricing’s biggest cheerleaders.

So why bother? Because this system benefits government generally and politicians personally. It’s no accident that a mayor hinting at a presidential campaign prominently featured congestion pricing in his ballyhooed “PlaNYC,” the blueprint he unveiled last April. Altogether, PlaNYC contains a staggering 127 “initiatives.” These include pushing commuters onto the subways via an \$8 tax on each car entering certain parts of Manhattan. Both the price and the area covered by this double-dipping will rise faster than baking bagels; they already have, even in the planning stages. Congestion pricing and PlaNYC’s other hokum generated lots of publicity, as the *New York Sun* observed, “It could also help the mayor appear to be a leader on a global issue that could be a key topic in the 2008 presidential race, which Mr. Bloomberg could enter as an independent candidate.”

Bloomberg peddles congestion pricing as zealously as snake-oil. He even taught bureaucrats from other cities—Albuquerque, Austin, Chicago, Houston, Indianapolis, Los Angeles, New Orleans, Philadelphia, Salt Lake City, San Francisco, and Trenton—how to foist it on their denizens at a conference last May.

Crystal-Ball Predictions

Bloomberg excuses his mischief because of a study predicting the state of the city over the next 23 years. Supposedly, a million new residents will enrich New York—though that’s a bugaboo rather than a

Anyone completely serious would undertake the infinitely more difficult and dangerous work of privatizing all things automotive, including roads.

blessing to the Malthusian mayor. Either way, crystal balls are notoriously wacky and wrong. In the 1960s, pundits predicted we'd be living underground and on the ocean's floor by now. And then there was the dire—but false—alarm in the late '90s about an event only a few years off: Y2K. Yet PlaNYC dictates “sweeping” changes in New Yorkers' lives because of predictions for a quarter-century in the future.

Our taxes bought this forecast from McKinsey & Co., a firm that employs a bevy of very expensive “problem solvers” but not a single seer. No doubt, its “study”—the term court charlatans use for a guess gussied-up in jargon—is as wrong as the advice it gave AT&T in 1983, when its “problem solvers” allegedly pooh-pooed cell-phones as a niche market.

No matter: congestion pricers treat McKinsey's guesstimate as fact. “[F]rankly,” says Hope Cohen, a former bureaucrat who now works for the Manhattan Institute, “our transportation system is strained almost to the breaking point in many places and clearly will not be able to handle the additional million people anticipated to be here in the next generation.” Cohen brings a bureaucrat's point of view to this “problem”: “we,” she says, meaning herself and her friends in government rather than the drivers and taxpayers on whom they will experiment, “have to start figuring out how to make our transportation system work better and be more efficient. That includes discouraging unnecessary and inefficient car trips—especially, but not only, in Manhattan.”

Against all reason and experience, the Manhattan Institute and other boosters of congestion pricing insist that it is a “market-based” solution to traffic. But what entrepreneur can get away with charging customers multiple times for the same service?

The free market is a poor man's best friend, supplying his needs and even some of his wants at prices he can afford, however small his budget. Then government invades. It piles on taxes, tariffs, licenses, fees, and presto: the poor man once again barely subsists. This alone brands congestion pricing as government-based, not

market-based, because it preys on the poor, hitting them hardest. U.S. Rep. Anthony Weiner (D-NY) told the *New York Sun*, “It's going to be a rather substantial tax on people already struggling to make it.” And Richard Brodsky, a Democrat in New York's State Assembly, summarized the social engineering inherent in congestion pricing: “Access to things that are traditional New York City are being handed out on a class basis.” Accordingly, the city's rulers are scrambling to ensure that congestion pricing robs only the serfs, not them: the *New York Post* reported, “A debate has broken out within the City Council over whether legislators—who'll soon have to weigh in on congestion pricing—should be reimbursed for tolls when they drive to City Hall.”

The free market is a poor man's best friend, supplying his needs and even some of his wants at prices he can afford, however small his budget.

The Elderly

And what of elderly folks? The *Christian Science Monitor* quoted “Queens Village resident Gabriella Krill [who] thought the proposed tax would be unfair on seniors who already pay heavy taxes to live in [New York C]ity. ‘Subways are hard—to go up and down stairs. Buses are hard to get out of,’ she said.” Thanks to Social Security, many folks subsist on fixed pittances, which won't allow them to pay

another \$8—to start—when they must visit their doctors in Manhattan.

Congestion pricers misrepresent the market when they blame it for the higher prices their ploy will inflict. They swipe one of the market's aspects—charging more for a scarce good, in this case space on a crowded road—and sever it from competition, the unfailing safeguard against artificially high prices. Their swindle operates in a vacuum, without the feedback and control of competition and pricing. We have no recourse but to use roadways as the state decrees.

A vocal advocate of congestion pricing is The Partnership for New York City. Founded by David Rockefeller in 1979, the Partnership is “a select group of two hundred CEOs (‘Partners’) from New York City's top corporate, investment and entrepreneurial firms. Part-

ners are committed to working closely with government, labor and the nonprofit sector to enhance the economy and maintain New York City's position as the global center of commerce, culture and innovation." In plain English, they seek to effect the most unnatural of acts: interlacing Adam Smith's invisible hand with government's iron fist.

Representing these select Partners at an "event" the Manhattan Institute sponsored to promote congestion pricing was president Kathryn Wylde: "We at the Partnership ask ourselves all the time: What is contributing to the cost of doing business in New York?" That's easy, and I'm not even a Partner, let alone their president: high taxes, strangling regulations, and endless bureaucracy. But no, in the Partnership's cushy world, government is never at fault: "Higher salaries, in a way, directly relate to the length of commute and the difficulty of commute in terms of attracting talent."

The Partners also "wonder why construction costs are going up one percent a month in New York." Another easy one: taxes, regulations, and bureaucracy, specifically the city's months of withholding the permits it requires contractors to buy from it. Wrong again, says our expert: "A major contributor to construction problems and delays is traffic congestion. Congestion also has a negative impact on manufacturing, which is an industry we've been hemorrhaging for the last decade."

Ms. Wylde rejoiced when the feds handed New York \$345 million of your taxes: "Federal funding provides the carrot that will help pay for new buses, faster subways and the other measures required to incentivize people to get out of their cars and on to public transportation." But New York City has already "incentivized" plenty, from frequent and exorbitant tolls to roads with more potholes than paving to cops who snarl traffic while snarling at drivers. Anyone still sitting behind the wheel is there because public transit's disadvantages outweigh driving's, considerable though they are.

Busybodies both political and private have hectored us for decades now, trying to push us onto mass transit. And we don't want to go. We overwhelmingly prefer the comfort, convenience, and privacy of our cars. Congestion pricing is the latest salvo in this war. "Many

US mayors have eyed London's success since 2003 in charging about \$16 for drivers to enter the city at peak times," the *Christian Science Monitor* reported. "Traffic delay in the British capital is down about 17 percent and the use of mass transit is up about 16 percent. One expert calls this a 'virtuous cycle.'"

How arrogant and condescending! Most of the virtuous are the poorer commuters who can't afford yet another automotive tax. Those secretaries and busboys, clerks and janitors will be reluctant customers of New York's public transit, too, under congestion pricing. The city's antiquated subways are dangerous, deafening, dirty, crowded, unreliable, uncomfortable, and inconvenient. They also frequently stink, thanks to New York's dearth of public facilities. No wonder even the impecunious will brave 30-minute delays at bridges and tunnels and some of the nation's highest tolls. Buses are marginally better: they aren't usually as dangerous, deafening, and dirty, but they are every bit as crowded and unreliable. Waiting 15 or 20 minutes for the next one is not unusual. Because taxes compensate the missing revenue when ridership plummets, the city is unlikely to improve the system, however much of our money the feds throw at it.

Chilling Objective

Meanwhile, the Partnership has a chilling objective that may explain the elite fascination with mass transit—for other people: the Partners seek to "allow business leaders to work more directly with government and other civic groups to address broader social and economic problems in a 'hands on' way." Who knew that CEOs stranded in traffic is a "broader social and economic problem"? Powerbrokers and politicians with their chauffeurs and police escorts will no doubt glide about town far more pleasantly when everyone else is banished to the subways.

A serf's place is on a bus or train: he shouldn't be clogging the roads for his betters. Under congestion pricing, taxpayers who refuse to submit to the subway's indignities (which now include random and warrantless searches), who prefer the freedom and independence a car brings, will pay for their uppity attitude.

Yet again.

