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From the Los Angeles Times

Editorial

Congestion pricing on freeways benefits all

Even low-income drivers will have a choice, and income from the experiment will also pay for public-transit improvements.

June 13, 2009

As Los Angeles gears up to conduct its first [experiment with congestion pricing](#), the notion is fueling angst among proponents of economic justice -- who fret that charging a toll for faster freeway access would consign the poor to gridlock while CEOs fly past in their BMWs. In reality, congestion pricing is the fairest method of funding highway improvements yet devised.

Los Angeles has received a \$210.6-million federal grant to conduct a [demonstration project](#) involving high-occupancy toll lanes. These work very much like carpool lanes in that vehicles with one or more passengers can use them for free, but they also allow lone motorists to use them by paying a toll. On the 10 Freeway, toll lanes in both directions will be added along a 14-mile stretch from Alameda Street to the 605 Freeway, and an existing carpool lane on the 110 Freeway will be converted into a toll lane in an 11-mile stretch from Adams Boulevard to 182nd Street.

The toll lanes are designed to keep traffic within them moving at 45 mph or faster, even at rush hour; if speeds fall below that, the lanes won't be available for toll payers. The prices will probably vary by time of day, at their highest during peak demand and their lowest when traffic dwindles.

Critics argue that highways are a public benefit and that toll lanes primarily advantage the rich because low-income people can't afford to use them. But this ignores the realities of highway funding, which currently disadvantage the poor far more than toll lanes would.

Most highway improvements are paid for with state and federal taxes on gasoline. This is an extremely regressive tax, not only because rich and poor alike pay the same amount, but because poor people typically can't afford modern gas-sipping vehicles -- there are a lot more Priuses in Santa Monica than in South L.A. Congestion pricing, though, imposes a user fee;

only the people who use toll lanes pay the cost, and the people who use them tend to have higher incomes. It's hard to imagine a fairer system.

Of course, what applies to most toll lanes and roads doesn't apply to the L.A. demonstration project. Usually, these improvements are built by private companies, and the tolls are used to repay the cost of construction. Some argue that roads are a public resource and should be free for all, but that hardly applies when the resource is private and wouldn't exist if not for the toll revenues. Yet L.A.'s toll lanes are being paid for by the federal government with taxpayer money. So shouldn't rich and poor benefit equally?

In truth, low-income commuters stand to benefit a great deal from L.A.'s experiment. Only 25% of the project's budget will be spent on developing the new toll lanes; the bulk of the money will pay for public-transit improvements, including the purchase of 57 new express buses traveling the affected routes. And by law, the money from the tolls must be spent on transit or carpool improvements in the same corridor where the funds were generated.

The toll lanes will provide people of all incomes with a choice they don't currently have. It's true that choosing to pay the toll will be easier for people of means, but it's senseless to argue that even low-income people are better off having no choice at all. Moreover, Los Angeles' toll lanes are only an experiment; officials must report back to the Legislature on the impact of the lanes by December 2012, and among the things they are required to study is whether low-income people are better or worse off as a result of the lanes. Let's not rule out a potentially time-saving innovation in this gridlocked city before the facts are in.