A Century of Fighting Traffic Congestion in Los Angeles

2:00-2:45pm ET

Speakers: Martin Wachs, Peter Sebastian Chesney, Yu Hong Hwang
Moderator: Jeff Davis

NEXT WEBINAR
What Counts in Mobility? Rethinking Transportation Modeling
Wed, October 21
2:00pm ET
A CENTURY OF FIGHTING TRAFFIC CONGESTION IN LOS ANGELES 1920-2020

Eno Transportation Center Webinar – October 15, 2020

Martin Wachs
Yu Hong Hwang
Peter Sebastian Chesney
SCAG has proposed & LA Metro is studying dynamic pricing to address the region’s traffic

- SCAG proposed a “Go Zone” pilot test of cordon pricing in West LA
- LA Metro is engaged in a “Congestion Reduction Study” that includes review of congestion pricing options more extensive than the three existing “Express Lanes” in the region.
- Congestion pricing proposals are under consideration in New York, San Francisco, and Seattle
- These all reflect adoption of forms of congestion pricing in Singapore, London, Stockholm, Milan, and elsewhere

**Our study was meant to inform current discussions by showing that congestion reduction using many other means for more than a century has been unsuccessful & that road pricing has been long proposed but rarely implemented**
LA gets a bad rap – it “loves cars” no more than other cities but certainly is congested

• Car ownership of 1.8 cars per household is about the same as Seattle and Cincinnati.
• VMT Per capita of 22.3 per day, about the same as Akron, and half as Beaumont.
• Los Angeles’ transit ridership is third among all cities in the nation behind New York and Chicago.
• There would be many benefits to increasing transit use but doing so would not eliminate congestion.
• Blaming congestion in Los Angeles on a love of cars ignores the fact that large cities all over the world experienced congestion for centuries even before the automobile was invented.
• Traffic patterns in part due to “dense sprawl,” multi-centric development patterns initiated by streetcars and followed by highways and cars
Traffic congestion in LA has been a concern for more than a century

“Great as has been the increase in population, buildings and property values, vehicular traffic has increased even faster.”

Frederick Law Olmsted, Harland Bartholomew, and Charles Henry Cheney, 1924

“The alarming increase in street accidents and in street congestion during the past few years has rendered the correction of traffic conditions one of the most important municipal problems of the present day.”

Miller McClintock, 1925
LA has a history of plans, programs, & initiatives to reduce congestion which persists & worsens

- Expanding capacity
- Regulating traffic
- Land use planning & control
- Information & communication to influence travelers
- Ridesharing & telecommuting

*Will give brief examples of each strategy in the past selected from many more in the report which we commend to you*

- Charging differential prices to influence travel choice was proposed a century ago but has been applied in only a few instances
Strategy: Expanding movement capacity

• "All authorities agree that the congestion is primarily caused by insufficient street area. This is readily apparent when figures are consulted and Los Angeles is shown to have the smallest percentage of street area of any of the large cities of America”
  Los Angeles Traffic Commission, 1922

• Major early traffic “milestones”
  • A Major Traffic Street Plan in 1924
  • Kelker, DeLeuw and Company, Report and Recommendations on a Comprehensive Rapid Transit Plan for the City of Los Angeles, 1925
Strategy: Expanding capacity had early support & opposition

• Proponents like Miller McClintock argued for more grade separations, subways as the city grew

• Opponents argued that building subways would serve business and land development in downtown at the expense of outlying areas

• In the 1920’s Clarence Dykstra argued that building road & transit capacity would induce more traffic and quickly congest the expanded network

• Freeways for the Region published in 1943 by the Los Angeles County Regional Planning Commission. “A Master Freeway Plan for Los Angeles”
Strategy: Regulating traffic

“The Council shall, by ordinance, within ninety days after this charter becomes effective, provide for the study of the problems of street traffic and for the recommendation of rules and regulations in relation thereto.”

L.A. City Charter, Article III, Sec. 36, 1924

- Early regulation banning horse-drawn vehicles, jitneys, left turns in the downtown area
- Parking ban of 1920, citizen revolt, and reversal followed by more gradual regulation
- 1984 Olympics - temporary & voluntary
- Mayor Tom Bradley’s Anti-Gridlock campaign
Strategy: Land use planning & control

- Transit promoted decentralization to reduce central city crowding & land-use strategies have been addressed through the present
Strategy: Land use planning & control

• Proposition U in 1986 - *Initiative for Reasonable Limits on Commercial Building and Traffic Growth*

• *Failed California State Legislation – SB50 - 2020*
Strategy: Information & communication to influence travelers

- 1955 “Sigalert”
- Helicopter Traffic Reports
- 1962 – TRW-300 Traffic Computer
- 1990’s Project “Pathfinder”
- 1970’s-80’s “ATSAC”
- Waze and Google
Strategy: Ride-sharing & telecommuting

- 1973 Los Angeles “Commuter Computer
- Jack Nilles 1973 Book: *The Transportation-Telecommunications Tradeoff*
- We are not sure what will happen after the COVID 19 Pandemic
After a century peak-hour traffic persists –

• Adding capacity, regulating flow, changing land use, ridesharing, informing drivers have all been tried
• No political capacity for new road capacity – cost and opposition
• Transit network growing and ridership declining
• Community opposition to densifying near transit
• Broad recognition of induced traffic & latent demand
• Is it time for serious consideration of dynamic road pricing?
Using Prices to Influence Travel Choice

• 1920’s Pigou and Knight introduce congestion pricing
• 1960’s Vigorously advocated by Vickrey; Smeed Report in London; Wilbur Thompson: “the city as a distorted price system.”
• 1976 Berkeley announces intention to try road pricing; Governor Reagan calls the idea “zany” concept from “transit zealots.”
• 1990s - First priced “express lanes” on Riverside Freeway (SR91) prove to be more than “Lexus Lanes.”
• Congestion Pricing in Singapore, Stockholm, London, Milan and elsewhere being noticed and considered
Lessons from history
Principles quoted from the 1964 Smeed Report

• Charges should be closely related to the amount of use made of the roads.
• It should be possible to vary prices for different roads (or areas), at different times of the day, week, or year, and for different classes of vehicle.
• Prices should be stable and readily ascertainable by road users before they embark upon a journey.
• Payment in advance and by credit should be possible.
• The costs for individual road users should be accepted as fair.
• The system should be simple for road users to understand.
• The equipment for charging should possess a high degree of reliability.
• The system should be reasonably free from the possibility of fraud and evasion, both deliberate and unintentional.
• The system should be capable of being applied, if necessary, to the whole country.
Current LA situation

- Three “express lanes” operating successfully in LA region
- High rates of violation and safety challenges
- Technology that enables road charging becoming universal
- SCAG recommended cordon pricing zone on west side
- Metro two-year study underway of “congestion reduction.”
Challenges facing LA road charge persisted throughout history

Decision-makers and critics:

• Believe pricing will hurt the poor & don’t recognize that earlier programs hurt the poor
• Believe incorrectly that there are no alternatives to peak-hour driving
• Believe incorrectly that travel choices are insensitive to price
• Claim recurring rush hour traffic jams are unavoidable but they result from policy choices
• Claim drivers are not flexible enough to change their lives in response to prices though they do so all the time
• Ignore how harmful unpriced traffic flows are to public health & carbon emissions
• Ignore the ways congestion pricing will improve buses and carpooling.
“I nicked the idea off Milton Friedman”

- Ken Livingstone, Socialist Mayor of London elected promising road pricing
- Milton Friedman, Ultra-Conservative Economist receiving Nobel Prize
To get the report, timeline, & podcast

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https://bit.ly/2IiDGkV
THANK YOU!

IT’S TIME FOR YOUR QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS

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