Deseret News Opinion

In our opinion: Congestion toll pricing could be a market-based solution for Utah's road woes

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Anyone who thinks New York City's new congestion pricing toll system is radical must not realize that Utah has had a mini version of this in place for years. High-occupancy vehicle lanes on urban stretches of I-15, also known by the acronym HOV, charge registered vehicles tolls that change throughout the day depending on the overall level of traffic congestion on the freeway.

Cars containing two or more people also may use these lanes with no charge.

The idea is to give motorists who carpool, or are willing to pay, a way to get where they are going faster. Over time, motorists who pay will learn to avoid the most expensive tolls by driving during the least-congested times, the thinking goes. Others will learn to ride with a buddy, thereby reducing congestion. This provides a market incentive for reducing traffic and relieving air pollution.

Now the state of New York has approved a plan allowing New York City to begin charging tolls to anyone who drives within lower Manhattan's business district. While details have yet to emerge, the idea is to charge a variable fee, based on the level of traffic. The hope is that this will unclog streets that are choked with traffic, due in part to tens of thousands of ride-sharing vehicles that have begun service in recent years.

The Wasatch Front is hardly comparable to New York City. The two have entirely different problems. But Northern Utah does have a clean air problem that, at certain times, presents general health hazards, and it is facing increasingly heavy traffic. Consistent traffic jams can hinder the movement of goods and services and pose a drag on the economy.

Utah should consider a much more aggressive congestion pricing strategy of its own.

A great misconception exists about New York's new plan. Because the city and New York state have liberal political majorities, the assumption is that congestion pricing is a liberal idea. The exact opposite is true. This is a market-driven solution that for years has been championed by groups such as the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank. It is grounded in the idea that market incentives provide the most effective and orderly solutions to problems and ought to be preferred over coercive, centrally planned solutions that involve rationing or other government mandates.

Several years ago, a senior fellow at Cato visited the Deseret News to explain this concept, armed with studies that showed at least two-thirds of rush-hour drivers don't absolutely have to be on the road during those high-traffic times. If the price of driving were high enough, they would choose to drive another time.

That's a radical notion that can't really be proven unless a comprehensive congestion pricing plan is put in place. Fortunately, London now has 16 years of data to show how its congestion pricing plan has worked. According to the Wall Street Journal, average speeds in London have increased by 30 percent, and 11 percent of traffic has shifted from cars to mass transit, cycling and walking because of congestion-based tolls. People tend to make decisions based on their own economic interests.

New York's plan is to raise money to maintain a crumbling transit system. In Utah, tolls could be used to reduce the state's gas tax. This would be a much fairer way to fund highway needs, given that drivers of all types of vehicles — electric, hybrid and natural gas-powered — would pay, and yet people could avoid heavy fees by driving when traffic is light, or by using surface roads.

Utah lawmakers already have passed legislation allowing for variable tolls. We trust New York's experiment will show the type of positive results that give officials here more confidence to move forward.