

Charlotte I-77 Congestion solution?

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If you're not a commuter, stay home during rush hour, Cato thinker says.

Toll roads and self-driven cars were attention-grabbing items during a recent high-level discussion concerning the region's traffic congestion, but a quick hit-and-run comment by Cato Institute Senior Fellow Randal O'Toole may have inadvertently nailed the solution head-on.

O'Toole, an authentic, advanced-degree egghead by any measure imaginable, referenced the idea during his meanderings about the self-driven car phenomenon that may very well alter automobile commuting in the not-too-distant future.

O'Toole said cars with collision-avoidance technology, lane-change alerts and other computerized guidance systems could easily become commonplace and significantly enhance highway travel. In fact, he said coming advancements in self-driving technologies — which could increase interstate lane capacity at peak hours from 2,000 vehicles per hour up to 8,000 vehicles per hour — are why, as a general rule, he's against any kind of investment in highway expansion. When the new technology is in place, he figures, extra lanes will not be needed.

And while the machinery to make that scenario possible — and affordable for all — is tweaked into reality, tolls could do the job of lessening traffic at peak times. Supply and demand would determine which vehicle owners were willing and/or obligated to pay the toll for certain highway lane access during rush hours. Substantial tolls at peak times would result in fewer cars, eliminating congestion and, subsequently, the need for more lanes.

And then the pearl. O'Toole said rush hour traffic congestion is not caused by office-, factory- or home-bound commuters, but by the assortment of other users (commercial haulers, vacationers, joy riders, shoppers, etc.) on the road at the same time. Using a chart indicating peak travel times on Interstate 77, O'Toole reasoned that a mere 15- to 20-minute schedule adjustment by non-commuting travellers each morning and afternoon could virtually eliminate gridlock.

Summarized, the simplistic solution is: restrict interstate travel in greater metropolitan areas to commuters between (just for example) 7:50 and 8:10 each morning and 4:50 and 5:10 each afternoon. That, according to O'Toole's calculations, would provide the break needed to keep all traffic flowing smoothly.

It's cheap and it's doesn't require any investment in infrastructure. The logistics and enforcement angles might still need some thorough examination, but the next time you're stuck in traffic, ask this question: Was this trip, at this particular time, necessary?