

Utah needs NYC-style congestion toll roads

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A few years ago, while on an ambitious coast-to-coast baseball road trip with my oldest son, I drove through New York City.

I don't mean I drove by it on major highways. I navigated through Manhattan and Brooklyn in search of old stadium sites. If you look closely, you can find vestiges of the old Polo Grounds and plaques where Ebbets Field and even Hilltop Park, first home of the Yankees (then called the Highlanders), once stood.

But this isn't about baseball. I have been to the city many times, and even lived there one spring as an intern, but actually driving through its traffic was a once in a lifetime experience, mainly because I wouldn't do it again. I quickly learned to bless the assembly line workers who had put a working horn in my car.

So it made a lot of sense when I heard that New York City soon will be charging congestion tolls to any drivers who go south of 60th Street in Manhattan.

The question is, could such a thing work along the Wasatch Front? Could this be an answer to crowded rush-hour freeways and bad air on inversion days?

First, an explanation of what congestion tolling is and what it is not. It is not a liberal solution to traffic congestion, such as you might expect from New York. It is, as Randal O'Toole of the libertarian Cato Institute has defined it, a solution based on "basic free-market principles."

If you want to control the consumption of something, put a market price on it. People will use less of something (in this case, a road) the more expensive it becomes, and more of something as it becomes cheaper.

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Congestion pricing places a flexible toll on roadways, the price of which goes up or down depending on traffic levels and air quality conditions. Utah already has this on the carpool lane of I-15 along the Wasatch Front. Solo drivers can use this lane by paying the price. Drivers with two or more people in the car may use it as well, but for free. The idea is to give people a way around traffic congestion if they're willing to pay, either in money or through an eco-friendly carpool.

No matter the home's age, it's possible to install a system to ensure better air quality, easier cleaning, and...

The concept would work more efficiently here if tolling covered all lanes at all times, but the very mention of such a thing tends to make drivers want to get out from behind the wheel and storm a public hearing.

Or so many politicians believe.

People may feel differently if the state decided to either eliminate or greatly reduce gas taxes as a tradeoff. Unlike gas taxes, congestion tolling would apply to electric, hybrid and natural gas vehicles. It would not diminish just because cars become more fuel-efficient.

O'Toole visited the Deseret News several years ago. During our discussion, he insisted that two-thirds of rush-hour drivers don't absolutely have to be on the road at that time. If the cost was high enough, they would find ways to travel during other, less congested times.

People don't like to hear that, but he insisted that studies show it is true. The result would be a leveling of traffic flow throughout the day. Traffic jams would be fewer, cars would spend less time idling and emissions would be reduced.

Supposedly, London, Stockholm and Singapore already have experienced some of this.

New York City poses some unique problems. To avoid tolls, people are likely to call on Uber drivers, instead, but the congestion in Manhattan today has been caused largely by an influx of thousands of ride-share drivers. Tolls may not help that situation.

New York's plan would cover all streets in the target area. I'm guessing Utah could apply it only to freeways and see real results.

Critics say the plan would hurt the poor the most. That may be true, although drivers here could avoid tolls by taking surface roads. Perhaps discounts could be offered to low-income drivers.

A lot of cities nationwide will be watching New York to see how this plan goes.

The truth is, northern Utah doesn't have New York-style traffic. Here, horns are used only as last resorts to express anger or frustration. But bad air, a rapidly growing population and an increasingly inefficient gas tax — not to mention viable alternatives for many people through light rail, commuter rail and buses — may make variable, congestion tolling just the thing we need in the future.