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Want to Add to Congestion? Then It's Going to Cost You

By ZUSHA ELINSON

Jay Primus's small office at the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency could be mistaken for that of a science professor. The walls are covered with giant maps and colorful charts, all aimed at helping to illuminate one of the big mysteries in the life of any city dweller: how to find a parking space.

Mr. Primus runs [SFPark](#), a recently launched experiment that seeks to eliminate congestion by changing the dynamics of parking. The approach is twofold: to change the price of a parking space according to demand and thereby keep spaces open on every block, and to lead drivers to open spaces using an array of sensors, eliminating congestion caused by circling drivers.

Mr. Primus is part of the vanguard of public officials around the Bay Area who are pushing sophisticated traffic and parking solutions built on the theory of [congestion pricing](#). Though Mr. Primus and other traffic specialists sprinkle their conversations with jargon like "availability targets" and "gradual periodic price change," the basic idea behind congestion pricing is a simple one: charge more to use streets and highways at the busiest times, and discourage those who don't want to pay a premium at peak hours.

Congestion pricing is already in place in cities including Singapore, London and Stockholm, but it has made few inroads in this country. An effort to charge motorists for driving into Manhattan, championed by [Michael Bloomberg](#), the mayor of New York, failed in 2008 in the face of virulent opposition from legislators in the city's four other boroughs and the suburbs.

But the Bay Area is pushing ahead, albeit gradually. Last year, the toll on the Bay Bridge was raised to \$6 from \$4 during the rush hours in an effort to loosen congestion. In September, a toll lane whose price increases as traffic does was opened on Interstate 680, a historically jammed stretch for commuters heading from the East Bay to Silicon Valley.

More projects are on their way: toll lanes are slated for Highway 237 in the South Bay, and for Interstate 580 in the East Bay; higher tolls during peak hours are being considered for other bridges; and San Francisco officials have floated a plan to charge motorists driving into downtown San Francisco.

So far, the experiments have yielded mixed results.

Traffic on the Bay Bridge has dropped 2.35 percent during the morning commute and 3.45 percent in the afternoon since the toll was raised last July. Between 5 and 10 a.m., and 3 and 7 p.m. on weekdays the toll is \$6 — \$2 more than the regular rate.

“I think that a small number of people who can do a time shift have done so — they’re either taking their trip earlier in the day or later in the day,” said John Goodwin, spokesman for the [Metropolitan Transportation Commission](#). “The numbers are small, but just tinkering at the margins can have a significant effect on the commute traffic.”

The result, measured by the M.T.C., is that the time it takes to drive five miles from University Avenue in Berkeley to the Bay Bridge toll plaza has been cut by three minutes to an average of 24 minutes during the morning rush.

Fred Foldvary, a Santa Clara University professor who has studied congestion pricing, said the M.T.C. needs to crank up the Bay Bridge toll even more.

“They have to keep increasing the charge during the peak times, and maybe even reduce it at other times, to see a real change,” Mr. Foldvary said.

The I-680 toll lane, stretching 14 miles between Highway 84 in Pleasanton and 237 in Milpitas, was designed to thin out what had been a traffic nightmare during the dot-com boom in the late 1990s. The toll has gone as high as \$7 in heavy traffic; it bottoms out at 30 cents when there is no backup. The price is displayed on a sign, and the toll is charged through [FasTrak](#).

So far, the toll lane has not had much of an effect, mainly because the traffic congestion it was supposed to address has largely been tamed by the economic slump, said Dave Hyams, a spokesman for the project. The average speed during peak hours in the non-toll lanes is 57 miles per hour, up from 56.9 m.p.h. since it opened. The toll lane averages a swifter 65.8 m.p.h. — swifter even than the 65 m.p.h. speed limit.

A regular 680 commuter, Cheryl Cook-Kallio, a teacher and Pleasanton City Council

member, said she has never used the new lane. “I have yet to be on the freeway where the traffic has been so bad that I was tempted,” she said, adding that the express lane also does not have access to her exit.

In San Francisco’s new parking scheme, Mr. Primus and his colleagues will adjust the prices at 7,000 meters and 20 city-owned parking garages with the aim of keeping two spaces available on every block. Drivers could pay from 25 cents to \$6 an hour depending on demand. Currently, rates run from \$2 to \$3.50 an hour.

“We believe that relatively small differences in price should be enough to park in a different location,” Mr. Primus said. “All we need is one person to notice that the price has changed. It’s a subtle tool for managing congestion.”

Sensors on the street will feed into an as-yet-unfinished database. Parking prices will be raised — no more than once a month — when more than 85 percent of the spaces on a block are occupied. Prices will be lowered if less than 65 percent are full.

Drivers can keep track on a new [iPhone](#) app, which so far has been criticized for running slowly — and being dangerous to use while driving. Drivers can pay with credit cards and re-up via cellphone.

David LaBua, who has written a book about San Francisco’s secret parking spots called “[Finding the Sweet Spot](#),” said he is not a fan of SFPark.

Mr. Labua said to he tried to use the new software to find parking in the Marina, but eventually gave up when the supposedly available spots evaporated before his arrival. Instead, he used his own method: look for orange and white construction markers that signal “no parking,” but whose date has expired.

“I think once the meter prices go up to \$6, there is going to be critical mass of car drivers — can you imagine that?” said Mr. LaBua, making reference to the monthly bicyclists’ demonstration that clogs downtown streets.

But Donald Shoup, a [U.C.L.A.](#) professor of urban planning whose influential book “[The High Cost of Free Parking](#)” inspired SFPark, said people will get used to the idea that “it’s fair that the very best spaces cost more.”

Mr. Shoup added that the parking program may be so successful in curbing traffic that the city won’t need to pursue more controversial plans for raising the cost of driving.

“It’s a lot harder to charge a moving car than it is charging a parked car, especially when people are already used to paying for parking,” Mr. Shoup said.

In an echo of the bitter battle that broke out over the issue in New York, the San Francisco County Transportation Authority nearly touched off a border war with San Mateo County last year when it floated the idea of charging commuters from the Peninsula a toll to enter San Francisco. Assemblyman Jerry Hill even threatened to charge San Franciscans for driving into San Mateo County.

The idea of a border toll was scrapped in December, but the transportation authority is moving ahead and studying two plans that would charge drivers for entering downtown, the most congested part of the city.

Zabe Bent, a planner with the authority, said that any toll to drive downtown would be accompanied by an improvement in public transit to allay concerns about unfair impacts on commuters.

zelinson@baycitizen.org