

Road Toll Confusion

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Confusion, inertia, and economic illiteracy are about to disastrously remake a lot of Texas cities. We have to assert common sense economics, now, or suffer major irreversible negative consequences. The failure to act so far is a sad commentary on the state of Texas leadership. The potential leaders who 'get it' have told me, I'm not going to try and change that; fear of uninformed voters. Lead them! Inform them!

Okay, let's start with inertia. It overwhelms our common sense, hence the strong term, economic illiteracy; a selective mental disorder that occurs most often for entrenched concepts like freeways. We are used to 'freeways'; roads wholly funded by gasoline taxes. Freeways are appropriate until major shortages (traffic jams) become commonplace. Pricing (tolls) is the ECO 101 answer to shortages. But we persist in our freeway thinking, and we see the result around the U.S. in the form of phenomenally costly congestion (time loss, fuel consumption, pollution, etc.) and mega-roads like Atlanta's 15-, going on 23-lane IH-75, and chaotic perma-construction.

Second, let's deal with the confusion surrounding the words 'toll' and 'road.' Of course there are toll roads; roads wholly funded by tolls charged 24/7, though the toll may (and should) vary by time of day. Toll road issues like the Trans-Texas Corridor are a question of how best to pay for a new road. My concern is management of existing roads.

Tolls can be applied to existing roads as a management tool. But many states, sadly including Texas, ban the use of tolls as a management tool. It's democracy, combined with lack of leadership, reflecting the popular belief that it is wrong to charge people to drive on a road they have already paid for. But rush hour (that's when there is a shortage) tolls can pay for road maintenance and expansion. It's a good idea because the rush hour toll reduces peak travel and thus reduces congestion and road construction. Rush hour **tolls reduce total highway spending**, while also reducing congestion. But we resist because we are used to freeways even though they are anything but, especially once they become congested.

Where has this popular resistance to tolls on existing roads gotten us? On several roads, we are just about to undertake building toll lanes next to the existing 'free' lanes. You'll have a choice between clogged free lanes and a very high toll. So, we're going to build escape lanes for the rich. Think about this, and then act. Are you going to switch to the toll lanes before the 'free' lanes are really clogged? The toll lanes will be empty ~18 hours daily. So, to pay for the toll lanes during the few hours anyone is inclined to use them, the toll has to be high. For the SR-91 toll lanes (Los Angeles), the approximate rush-hour toll is \$10!!!! Surprise, the adjacent free lanes are clogged!!

To avoid the lunacy of empty expensive toll lanes used by no one most of the time, and the rich during rush hour, demand a change in the law to allow rush hour road tolls on existing roads, with the toll revenue earmarked for maintenance and expansion of the road segments where the tolls were collected. Then, all the lanes are available to everyone all of the time, traffic moves during rush hour, and the toll is low because every rush hour traveler is paying it. And the toll funds road expansion, as needed.