

“Congestion Tolls are a Good Investment of Political Capital”

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October 2, 2006

The economics of rush hour road (RHR) tolls is settled. Such tolls reduce construction spending and hassles, while reducing traffic jams, air pollution, fuel use, car upkeep costs, and accidents. RHR tolls are smaller than the tolls charged through wacky schemes to fund mostly empty, separate toll lanes alongside jammed free lanes.

Now, thanks to some entrepreneurial leaders in London and Stockholm, we can say that the politics of RHR tolls **can be** attractive as well. ‘**Can be**’ because political timing and policy design are critical factors. In both places, leaders went ahead despite strong opposition, choosing good policy over short-term political expediency. The RHR toll policy worked as predicted by basic economic theory. Public opinion changed to reflect the reality on the ground. For example, in Stockholm “widespread opposition to Stockholm’s congestion charge appears to have evaporated. 62% of Stockholm residents are planning to vote to keep the charge (www.thelocal.se).” RHR tolling is a conservative, market-based policy that appeals to non-conservatives.

So, you leader-wannabes, do you want to do well for yourself by doing good for Texas’ major cities (avoiding a largely irreversible major disaster)? Then repeal the state law that precludes use of RHR tolls for existing roads and forces us to choose between bad policies; huge freeways (23 lanes in Atlanta!?), or a mix of jammed ‘free’ lanes next to mostly empty (~18 hours daily), expensive separate toll lanes. In conjunction with that repeal, propose what Sweden did; a trial period for RHR tolls followed by a public vote to keep or terminate the RHR tolls. It’ll be a winner if tried, and you’ll be a winner for proposing this solution. That’s entrepreneurial conservatism. Take an effective, but unattractive policy opposed for being misunderstood just because it is new or because of poor economic education by our public school system, and lead people to it, and then benefit when it works.