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HOW CONGESTION CHARGING COULD UNCLOG AUCKLAND

Congestion charging could be a game-changer for Auckland, providing faster commute times, safer roads, reduced maintenance costs, increased productivity and a better quality of life for Aucklanders, write **Simon Buxton** and **Chris Ballantyne**.

Auckland faces a crucial choice about whether and how to make use of a short window of opportunity: get to grips now with its growing traffic-management issues or suffer far worse, even crippling, congestion in the future. What is really at stake is the kind of city Aucklanders want their city to be. The case for such an intervention is outlined in various recent publications, including the report *The Congestion Question: Could road pricing improve Auckland's traffic* (Ministry of Transport et al, 2019) and the *Benefits from Auckland*

road decongestion report (New Zealand Institute of Economic Research, 2017).

Benefits of demand management initiatives, such as cordon charging, generally include faster commute times, safer roads that are also less costly to maintain, increased productivity across the economy, and improved quality of life and satisfaction among residents.

So how could congestion charging unclog Auckland and what can the city learn from other leading international cities with experience at managing travel demand and congestion?



AUCKLAND CAN LEARN FROM OTHER LEADING INTERNATIONAL CITIES WITH EXPERIENCE AT MANAGING TRAVEL DEMAND AND CONGESTION?

THE LONDON EXPERIENCE

Let's look at the example of London and how it manages traffic demand. London has implemented a 'cordon-charging' system, which aligns with the most popular choice of method among our 2019 *New Zealand Sentiment Survey*¹ respondents, whereby the central city is zoned to require payment of a small fee to enter and traverse it in a vehicle (with some exceptions, such as for emergency vehicles). Discounts on the fee are given for residents living within the cordon. ➔

The initial response to the cordon charge was a reduction in traffic levels of 15 per cent, along with a 30 per cent increase in flow speeds. These tend to reduce over time with the growth of a city, so active monitoring and management is necessary to maintain the benefits, which also include economic benefits to local businesses and an increase in productivity (due to less time being lost in the transportation of goods). In addition, while there is a common perception that businesses within the cordon might lose custom, this is typically not borne out by the facts on the ground as pedestrians and cyclists spend more money in city centres than drivers and the attractiveness of a city centre is increased by less traffic.

Importantly, London had executive leadership, political direction and some social licence for its cordon-charging scheme due to an extensive consultation and a strategic plan for delivery of the scheme that was agreed in January 2001. A key aspect of its success was its preparation, which included an extensive public information campaign and a willingness to listen to local residents and businesses and incorporate their feedback.

Equally importantly, alternative transport measures need to be in place to give commuters a choice of travelling by other means. The government's spending and current construction of

15%

Reduction in traffic levels following the initial response to the cordon charge.

30%

The reduction in traffic levels resulted in an increase in flow speeds.

new transport infrastructure, from City Rail Link to new busways like the Auckland Manukau Eastern Transport Initiative, opens the door to more people being able to contemplate leaving their cars at home.

THE POLITICAL ASPECT

What of the politics of introducing a cordon charge? Will it be too thorny for any government to support and implement? The evidence suggests it would not be. The experience of Stockholm has shown that it has in fact proved to be popular with residents precisely because it improves the quality of life in the city and frees up the flow of traffic, saving people time and frustration. Indeed, Stockholmers even voted to keep the charge in a referendum.

Furthermore, the 2009 CURACAO *State of the Art* report into the implementation of urban road user charging as a demand-management tool in urban areas showed that acceptability in cities that have implemented such schemes dramatically increases post implementation; in Stockholm support went from 21 per cent before implementation to 67 per cent after, whereas in London it rose from 39 per cent before to 54 per cent after. The Norwegian city of Bergen saw support rise from only 19 per cent before to 58 per cent afterwards.

LOOKING AT LAND-USE PLANNING

Another key area that Auckland Council should look at before it considers bringing in a congestion charge would be to improve its land-use planning, concentrating more housing near transit hubs and encouraging people to change the way and time they travel to reduce the impact on the peak.

RING-FENCING FOR REINVESTMENT

One important point is that any fees collected should also be ring-fenced for reinvestment in better transport, both roads and public transport, enabling more vehicles to be taken off the road altogether and better circulation of those that remain. This will increase satisfaction with travel times among people in Auckland and its suburbs, further cementing support for a cordon-charging system.

THE DECISION FOR AUCKLAND

In the end, the choice is up to Auckland Council and other stakeholders, including central government, whether to implement a traffic-management system. But international experience has shown that such systems are not overly difficult to design, or to implement, provided careful consideration is taken to ensure a fair and appropriate charge, and that sufficient communication with the public at large is carried out to educate them on the benefits of the new system.

This article first appeared in AECOM's 10th Anniversary Edition of *Sentiment — Infrastructure and Buildings Construction Survey* report for New Zealand. Download the report to find out more? [MI](#)



RING-FENCING FEES FOR REINVESTMENT IN BETTER TRANSPORT WILL INCREASE SATISFACTION WITH TRAVEL TIMES AMONG PEOPLE IN AUCKLAND AND ITS SUBURBS, FURTHER CEMENTING SUPPORT FOR A CORDON-CHARGING SYSTEM.