

# **A Sustainable Environment: Our Obligation to Protect God's Gift**

by  
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## **One Solution to Solving Traffic Congestion**

A few weeks ago, I was traveling west on I-90 to pick up some friends at O'Hare Airport. The traffic congestion was so bad that due to my concern for their time, I called up my friends and told them to take a taxi. The following Sunday afternoon, I was traveling on the same expressway going to a wedding reception and I encountered traffic again – on a Sunday afternoon. As we all know, traffic congestion has been getting worse every year and will probably continue to do so in the foreseeable future. But does it really need to get worse? Is there a solution to this problem? I think so.

Economists tell us that efficient markets usually, or maybe, always prevail. However, sometimes it is difficult for the average consumer to spend capital in order to save on expenses. How many people are buying expensive compact fluorescent light bulbs to save energy on the long term? In an earlier article, I suggested that regulations might be necessary to force people to purchase the expensive appliance that will save energy and money on the long run. The same may apply to eliminating traffic congestion. We need road-pricing schemes to alleviate this problem.

A recent study shows that the average lost time of an urban motorist due to traffic congestion increased from 16 hours per year in 1982 to 62 hours in 2000. In addition, fuel efficiency decreases, pollution increases, and frustration rises. Along with lost time, each of these outcomes can be associated with a cost. What we need is a different expense to offset these somewhat hidden costs, and hopefully, the imposed cost is less than the accepted ones.

When a road is congested, it typically takes a slight reduction in the number of cars to unclog the road and get the traffic moving faster. As suggested by Resources For the Future ([www.rff.org](http://www.rff.org)), charging people for driving on busy roads at peak periods is the best way to achieve this reduction. If people have to pay for driving during peak periods, it would encourage them to take less congested routes into town, to carpool, to use mass transit, or even to work from home whenever possible.

Other approaches to reducing traffic have been attempted with less than encouraging results. Improving mass transit will shift some of the drivers off the congested road, but their space is usually filled by those that were not driving during peak periods when the road was congested. High-occupancy vehicle (HOV) lanes were added to urban freeways, but the results have been disappointing. Carpooling fell from 13.4% to 11.2% in the period 1990 to 2000. Consequently, the HOV lanes have less traffic flow than the unrestricted lanes, thus resulting in an underutilized and valuable asset. For a start to solving the traffic problem, the HOV lanes should be converted to high-occupancy/toll (HOT) lanes, allowing both high-occupancy vehicles driving for free, and

single occupant vehicles driving for a fee. The carpoolers may object because of the increase of cars in the HOV lanes, but they would have the option to use the unrestricted lanes. By having these options, economics would tend to maintain free flowing traffic in both the HOT lanes and the unrestricted lanes.

Recently, road pricing was introduced in London and congestion has been reduced considerably. Prior to this initiative, driving in central London was not much faster than a walk. In the U.S., Los Angeles, San Diego and Houston have converted HOV lanes to HOT lanes. In major urban cities where HOV lanes do not exist, the introduction to HOT lanes will have greater opposition. Drivers will not want to pay for something that was previously free. If the government doesn't impose regulations to change America's habits, economics is the only other answer.

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