



The Boston region is consistently ranked among the most congested regions in the United States. At the same time, its public transit system has been underfunded for decades, contributing to increased congestion and limited reliable alternative travel options.

ROADWAY-PRICING PROGRAMS

Roadway pricing is an umbrella term used to describe multiple types of policies that institute a direct user fee for public road use. Roadway-pricing policies are aimed at reducing congestion, often with the added benefits of raising revenue for transportation improvements, moving more people, supporting economic growth, and improving air quality, travel time reliability, and safety. Examples of roadway pricing include cordon-style congestion pricing, tolled express lanes, variable tolling based on traffic levels, and variable parking prices based on spot availability.

The Boston Region Metropolitan Planning Organization released a study that assessed the methods and impacts of multiple roadway-pricing strategies. Learning from Roadway-Pricing Experiences included five case studies of urban area implementations in the United States: Minneapolis-Saint Paul, the Bay Area in California, New York City, Washington, D.C., and Chicago. In the study, interviews with local planners highlighted the benefits and challenges of implementing different roadway-pricing strategies.

BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF ROADWAY-PRICING POLICIES

Benefits	Challenges
<p>More reliable travel times: Reducing congestion makes travel times more reliable, including for buses.</p>	<p>Political buy-in and public acceptance: Roadway-pricing programs are often unpopular until after they have been in place and shown benefits.</p>
<p>Revenue: Revenue from roadway pricing can be invested to improve public transit and active transportation.</p>	<p>Equity: Without mitigation, roadway user fees will disproportionately impact low-income communities.</p>
<p>Quieter streets: Reducing congestion can alleviate noise pollution from traffic such as engines and car horns.</p>	<p>Traffic diversions: Without special attention, roadway-pricing programs can divert traffic to roads without user fees.</p>
<p>Improved air quality: Fewer cars, especially fewer idling vehicles of all types, can reduce air pollution.</p>	<p>Interagency collaboration: Many agencies must effectively coordinate to navigate state and federal statutes and implement roadway pricing.</p>
<p>Recapturing lost time: Reducing congestion shortens travel times, allowing drivers and passengers to gain back dozens of hours a year.</p>	<p>Before-and-after monitoring: To understand the benefits and challenges of policies, implementation must include ways to measure success.</p>

LESSONS LEARNED FROM ROADWAY-PRICING PROGRAMS

Reducing the burden on low-income communities is essential.

Mitigation strategies, such as offering direct discounts to low-income residents and using revenue to fund improved public transportation in low-income communities, can help alleviate the burden roadway-pricing policies can place on disadvantaged communities. For example, the Bay Area Tolling Authority is piloting a 50 percent discount for low-income drivers using tolled express lanes.

Policies need to be aggressive to see impacts.

Roadway-pricing measures will not significantly affect congestion and influence mode shift unless 1) the fee is high enough to motivate people to travel differently, and 2) alternative transportation options are readily available, safe, and reliable. If the user fee is too low, the program will not reduce congestion. If affordable alternatives to driving, particularly public transit, are not viable, roadway pricing will disproportionately impact people with lower incomes.

Continuous evaluation is essential for improvement.

It is paramount to plan for many potential downstream impacts of roadway-pricing policies. Even then, unanticipated issues will arise after implementation. For example, the implementation of tolled express lanes in Minneapolis caused merging issues and diversions onto surface streets.

Build buy-in through pilot programs and robust community engagement.

A successful strategy for navigating the politically contentious nature of these strategies and maintaining support is early engagement, transparency, and communication of potential benefits with stakeholders. At the same time, roadway-pricing policies gain popularity after implementation, when the benefits are realized. Pilot programs can help raise public buy-in by previewing future benefits.

The Boston Metropolitan Planning Organization is a regional organization responsible for carrying out the federal transportation planning process. Read the full report Learning from Roadway-Pricing Experiences via bostonmpo.org/trending.