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**Reaction to “America’s Cities Are Still Too Afraid to Make Driving Unappealing”**

Emily Badger makes a good point that possibly one of the strongest ways to encourage alternative methods of transportation such as biking or public transit is to discourage driving – making it unappealing by making it expensive, more time consuming, or unpleasant. We can’t merely make alternatives better because as long as the driving status quo remains the same, people would be unlikely to consider switching modes.

One important thing to note is that this only works, and only should be used as a lever if alternatives already exist. If a city were to make it really difficult to drive into downtown (say by eliminating parking options) it must first have adequate alternatives for people to use to commute into downtown. Merely making driving less appealing without those alternatives would just have the effect of discouraging people from coming into downtown.

Even in a city such as New York, where alternatives *do* exist, they are already at capacity and (I imagine) couldn’t handle a significant portion of drivers suddenly switching over to public transit. Here, there needs to be some balance between disincentives and incentives such as adding more transit infrastructure and capacity. Without a mix of the two, everyone will just be negatively impacted – current transit commuters who will experience worse service and current drivers who might just have to put up with the disincentives without an adequate alternative to switch to.

The city also doesn’t have equal access to transit and thus disincentives have to be targeted. A blanket disincentive to all drivers, such as congestion pricing to all who drive into Manhattan, will disproportionately impact those who are already forced out into the transit deserts on the outskirts of Brooklyn or Queens because they can’t afford to live in places where transit service is better.

I find ideas such as the just announced New York City Streetcar very appealing because it could both add more public transit capacity while simultaneously making driving less appealing along the streetcar route, by removing either driving and/or parking lanes. It is also less obviously a disincentive than something like congestion pricing, which probably makes it an easier sell to drivers than methods such as congestion pricing where the impact is very obvious.

But, assuming that the alternatives exist – say, places where transit is just currently underutilized – I don’t think merely making driving less appealing is enough to get most people to switch modes. As driving gets marginally more unappealing, people wouldn’t just up and switch as soon as driving passes the people where it is more expensive, time consuming or unpleasant than alternative modes. The threshold is higher than that because people get set in their ways. If driving is what they are used to, they will keep driving. And without knowing they have crossed that point where driving becomes worse than transit, they wouldn’t know to give transit a try.

For instance, I lived for a few years in North Carolina, where public transit is not very good, and largely just serves those too poor to afford cars. Many people I interacted with there didn’t even know that there was public transit, and would never think to give it a try even as their driving commute kept getting worse. Similarly, coming from New York City, when I moved down there I used the busses rather than driving because that was what I was used to. It’s hard to make people change their ways, even if there is a good reason to.

New York City is probably an exception because even for people who regularly commute by car, they are likely familiar with using public transit as well. But for many cities across the country, where public transit is a niche thing, part of disincentivizing driving must also be public outreach and education. For instance, programs like the one that Arlington County is running, which teaches people how to use public transit. Chris Hamilton, who is part of the educational effort being run in Arlington, commented that with disincentives, “We wouldn’t have to do any of this.” But I think that’s not true. I still see that as an important piece of the bigger puzzle to encourage people to switch from driving to alternative modes.

All in all, I see disincentives as a very powerful tool, but one that must be wielded carefully.