

MEMO

To: Ed Gainey – Mayor of Pittsburgh

From: Michael Frajman – Economic and transportation advisor

Subject: Congestion pricing for Downtown Pittsburgh

Date: May 5, 2023

This memo proposes **congestion pricing as a means to reduce vehicular traffic into the core of Pittsburgh and to create a funding mechanism for improved public transit.** (See figure 1 in appendix). While the Steel City is no longer the titan of manufacturing it once was, the region continues to see growth in the business, finance, and education sectors. (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023) Carnegie Mellon and the University of Pittsburgh, both major economic drivers, as well as African American communities to the north and east of Downtown remain underserved by the existing rapid transit system. Pittsburgh's geography gives viability to the policy but concerns about equity remain.

Congestion pricing is one means of reducing traffic and addressing climate change while creating a new source of funding. By tolling drivers entering certain areas of the city, we can discourage car use and put the revenue toward infrastructure improvements, including transit. With less traffic there will be less emissions lingering in the city. Having less cars in the Downtown will also create less room for conflict and accidents with pedestrians and cyclists. Wear and maintenance cost can also be reduced on Downtown streets. By investing in mass mobility as opposed to just road improvements with the revenue, we can further offset the climate change inducing externalities of car use by providing alternative modes of travel to citizens.

Pittsburgh's road layout lends to congestion pricing. Our central business district sits on a peninsula with much of our inner ring suburbs connected to it via bridges. These bridges are a convenient choke point from where to charge a toll and will divert traffic away from the narrow

and criss-crossing streets of Downtown. The Allegany County ring road system provides several pre-existing routes to which industrial traffic can divert. (Positively Pittsburgh) Some of Pittsburgh's lowest earning communities are located just east of Downtown and have less need to cross over those bridges, sparing them the burden of the toll.

In the short run congestion pricing creates some inequality. While suburban communities to the south of Downtown already have a direct light rail connection to our business district, communities to the north of the peninsula do not. These northern neighbourhoods also have large concentrations of low income and minority households (Texeira and Zuberi, 2016) who are more dependent on driving (Tompkins, 2021). (See figure 2). These communities will likely feel the largest burden of the congestion tax if their commute takes them through Downtown.

Planning for public transit first can mitigate this concern. Extending our light rail system to the northern and eastern suburbs of the city before the implementation of a congestion tax can negate some spatial inequality around who pays the tax. Improving public transit first can also reduce the risk that drivers crowd around the ring of the toll zone and merely shift the area of congestion, as occurred in London, England, by creating new routes into Pittsburgh. **Measures can be taken to avoid making a congestion tax a regressive tax on lower income drivers from certain areas by investing in those neighborhoods and paying for it with future toll revenue.**

Congestion Pricing represents a strong option to reduce car traffic within Pittsburgh. Caution must be taken to ensure all communities have viable alternatives to driving into the city. Settling on the exact location of the toll zone and carving out exceptional user cases are next steps. If traffic can be reduced in the central business district, new more pedestrian-centered uses for that space could be explored to make Pittsburgh a more amenity rich destination.

APPENDIX

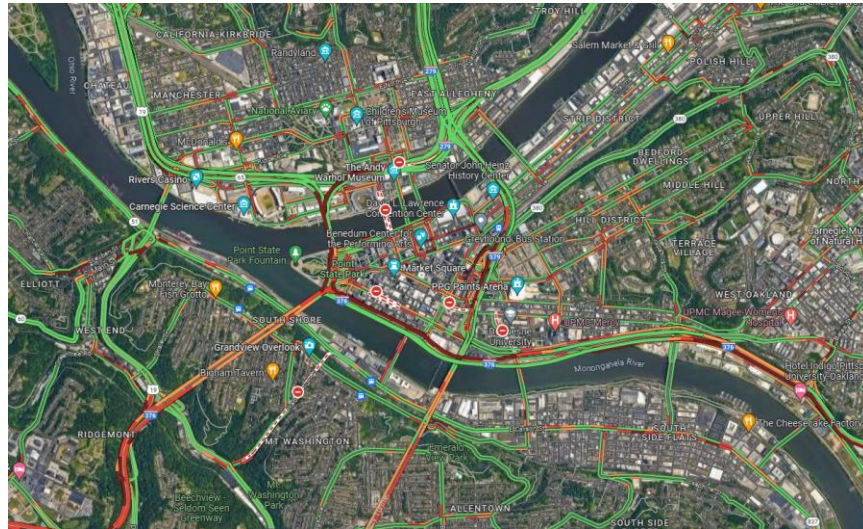


Figure 1: An illustration of rush hour traffic in Downtown Pittsburgh during weekday afternoon rush hour. Darker shades of red indicate slower travel times due to traffic volume and construction.
(Source: Google Maps)

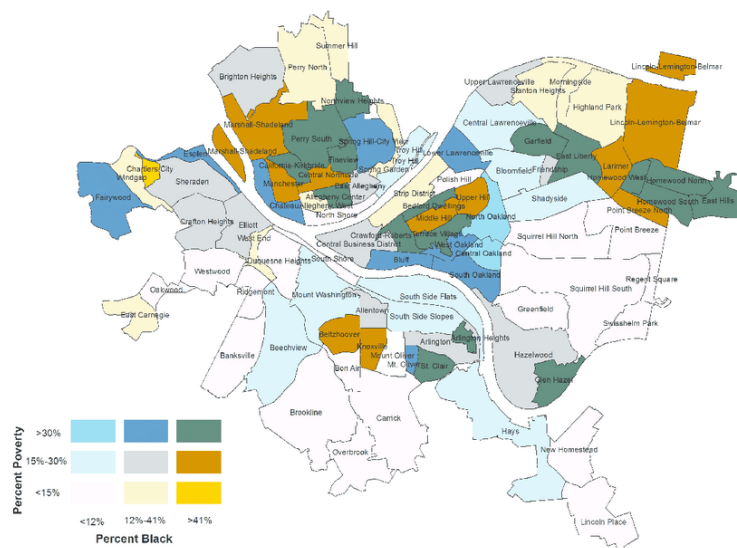


Figure 2: The larger concentration of poorer households and minority households to the north of Downtown could see the highest burden from a toll to enter Downtown via the bridges. Increasing the cost of driving may push these communities away from opportunities in the central business district
(Map source: Teixeira and Zuberi, 2016)

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