



Managing Public Perceptions of Tolling and Road Pricing

By David Ungemah

In the United States, the “new era” of tolling had its start with the adoption of the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) of 1991, which endorsed an expanded investigation into new tolling and road-pricing applications throughout the country. The new era embraced the use of emerging technologies for electronic toll collection, demand-managing toll rates, and various applications of infrastructure additions or conversions. By decade’s end, 15 states had enrolled in the program, and each had attempted some form of tolling or pricing on its highway and road systems.

Through the systematic study of feasibility, as required by ISTEA, definitive public attitudes emerged regarding tolling and pricing. Furthermore, the knowledge gained by active-project practitioners during this time allowed future-project practitioners to refine their approaches and messages to manage public perceptions of these facilities.

In Support of Road Pricing

In the 1970s, the federal government offered grant funding assistance to cities to support demonstrations of road pricing. However, “the opposition was so great from businesses, community groups, and the media that all studies were terminated before demonstration plans could be developed.”¹ Twenty-five years later, the idea of road pricing emerged again, due to great-

¹Higgins, Thomas J. “Congestion Pricing: Implementation Considerations.” *Transportation Quarterly* 48, no. 3 (summer 1994), Eno Transportation Foundation.



er flexibility in constructing or converting capacity as provided by electronic technologies and advanced computer algorithms that allowed tolling entities to “dynamically assign” toll prices in toll lanes, often varying them by time of day, vehicle class, and vehicle occupancy. Road pricing included not only new toll corridors but also toll lanes within existing general-purpose facilities—generally termed managed lanes.²

In the 1990s, the greatest momentum behind the concept was the potential to combine pricing with high-occupancy vehicle (HOV) facilities, the result of which was high-occupancy toll (HOT) lanes. Although the HOT lane concept has received positive attention for its applications in California, Texas, and, very recently, Minnesota, it’s still subject to significant public-acceptance barriers (outlined below) that originally prevented widespread introduction of such projects.

Although the HOT lane concept has received positive attention for its applications in California, Texas, and, very recently, Minnesota, it’s still subject to significant public-acceptance barriers.

The idea of tolling is new in many states, and proposed road-pricing projects have inevitably been controversial to one extent or another everywhere they’ve been considered. Public and political support has taken a considerable amount of time to nurture in states with implemented projects. In all states, public opinion was generally lukewarm, at best, to start.^{3, 4, 5} Only through the concerted efforts of agency champions,

² Managed lanes may include variants such as *express toll lanes*, *value express lanes*, *high occupancy toll lanes*, and others. Each term maintains different assumptions regarding vehicle and user-class preference; however, this has not been uniformly applied in either the transportation literature or media.

³ Munnich, Lee, and Joseph Loveland. *Value Pricing and Public Outreach: Minnesota’s Lessons Learned*. Transportation Research Board, Paper No. 05-0394, 84th Annual Meeting, January 2005.

⁴ Ungemah, David; Myron Swisher; and Charles Daniel Tighe. *You’re Making Me HOT: Talking High Occupancy Toll (HOT) Lanes with the Denver Public*. Transportation Research Board, Paper No. 05-1191, 84th Annual Meeting, January 2005.

⁵ Stockton, W. R.; C. L. Grant; F. McFarland; N. R. Edmonson; and M. A. Ogden. *Feasibility of Priority Lane Pricing on the Katy HOV Lane: Feasibility Assessment*. Research Report No. 2701-F, Texas Transportation Institute, Texas A&M University, June 1997.

project managers, and political leaders were toll concepts able to gain more public approval.

Public acceptance of toll roads, managed lanes, and other such concepts may be more elusive than it would seem. One explanation for the low levels of acceptance is that the nature of government in the United States is inherently biased against significant policy change. The closer an agency is to implementing a new toll facility, the more that agency is at risk of losing political support at the last minute due to public opposition.⁶ Within any given state, this scenario can be found in areas with or without toll roads.⁷



Barriers to Public Acceptance

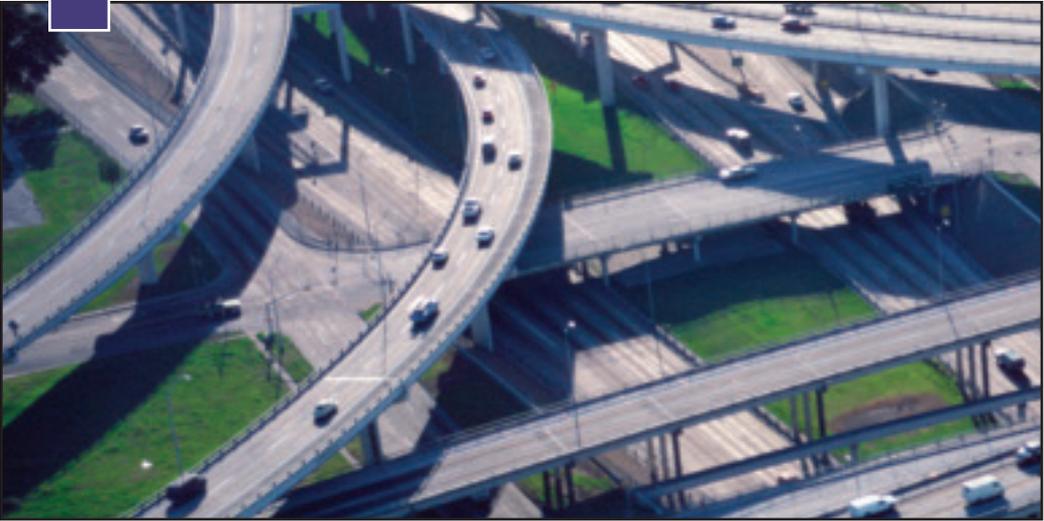
Road pricing remains controversial for various reasons, including concerns regarding equity for low-income individuals, geographic distribution of toll benefits and burdens, the privacy of electronic toll collection, and charges of “double taxation” of the public highway system. Every proposed toll corridor will have its own dedicated user groups (including commuters, transit riders, and truckers) that expect their interests to be protected at all costs.

Experience nationally has shown that toll projects are an easy target for criticism, which exacerbates the last-minute withdrawal of political support. It’s easy to find headlines critical of road-pricing concepts, but one rarely sees lead stories favoring implementation of

Public concern over equity issues regarding road pricing primarily relates to who gets to use the lanes and at what cost and how the generated revenues are used.

⁶ Cain, Alasdair. *Achieving Majority Public Support for Urban Road Pricing: Preserving the Driver’s Right to Choose*. Transportation Research Board, Paper No. 05-1791, 84th Annual Meeting, January 2005.

⁷ In Texas, for example, road pricing has proceeded in the public realm with relatively little controversy in Houston and Dallas. However, significant public opposition in San Antonio and Austin has made political support tenuous at best.



tolling, pricing, and their variants. Similarly, politicians can make a name for themselves by criticizing and even legislating against toll roads, road pricing, and managed lanes, as has occurred in Minnesota and Maryland.

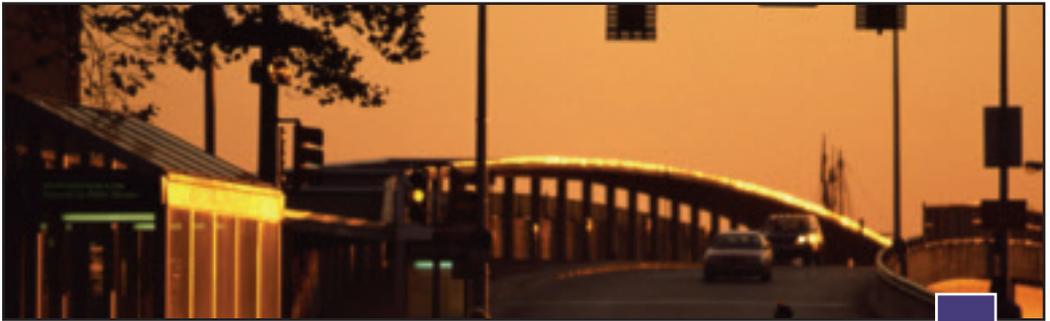
Opposition to pricing remains a stubborn public-opinion problem. Some opposition may be ideological in basis (such as the perception of tolls as an additional tax), whereas other opposition may be based on misperceptions regarding implementation (such as variable pricing being too complicated or unfair). The precedence of tolls in an area can be an advantage if the public is familiar with the concept; this advantage, however, goes only so far.

In the case of managed-lane projects, the public typically lacks hands-on experience with a toll facility within a free facility. In fact, media headlines often confuse tolling terms, using “toll road,” “HOT lane,” and “toll lane” indiscriminately and interchangeably. Even project stakeholders and transportation professionals who understand the distinctions also interchange the terms. Yet, it is the terminology itself that can be the source of problems.

The general public thinks a managed-lane project described as a “toll road” entails tolling across the entire corridor—all lanes of traffic—because that’s the standard practice for the typical toll road. On managed lanes, though, pricing is applied to only a portion of the facility, resulting in more choices for the motorist. The continued availability of a toll-free option coexistent with priced lanes is a significant distinguishing factor in the public acceptability of managed lanes versus wholesale facility or network pricing.

Public concern over equity issues regarding road pricing primarily relates to who gets to use the lanes and at what cost and how the generated revenues are used. Some fear that road pricing is too restrictive, benefiting only affluent drivers. Observed data on managed lanes in California discredit these concerns, but conventional wisdom about disproportionate benefits accruing to the wealthiest commuters can kill a project before it has an opportunity to prove itself, as happened in Maryland in 2002.⁸

Complicating the issue of equity in managed lanes, some interests entirely oppose the concept of providing any benefit to carpoolers, instead supporting express toll lanes without carpool discounts. Other interests, meanwhile, insist on providing free access for all carpools.



Other issues of opposition are less clearly related to equity but still have a perceived “unfairness” about them. For example, as a private facility, Orange County, California’s SR-91 faced initial opposition specifically to private, for-profit projects. San Diego’s I-15 researchers, meanwhile, found opposition to the inclusion of toll-free HOV-2s. I-15 focus-group participants responded negatively to dynamic pricing, which was seen as “price gouging.” They were unclear about why they found this pricing so unacceptable, but for them it was.

Public-acceptance issues are often location-specific and can involve the local political context. The SR-91 project, for example, was initially opposed by residents of Riverside County because it replaced an originally planned HOV lane to be funded by Orange County. Riverside County residents were

⁸ *Baltimore Sun*. “Give Toll Lanes a Try,” July 28, 2004, as reported on TOLLROADSnews, <http://www.tollroadsnews.com/cgi-bin/a.cgi/Z7qKEOVgEdiRW6r2jfFwDw>, accessed October 5, 2005.

especially disturbed because their county had already funded and partly built the HOV lane on its side of the county border. Opposition from Riverside County helped put pressure on the California Private Transportation Corporation to sell its facility to the Orange County Transportation Authority, which reintroduced HOV-3+ discounts.

Identifying Potential Advocates and Opponent

All road-pricing proposals should be viewed in the context of the political environment in which they are proposed. There are inherent differences between traditional toll roads and bridges, road pricing, express toll lanes, and managed lanes that will change the nature of both their opposition and their promotion. Recognizing these differences has proven to be important in advancing any particular project.

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Opportunities for coalition-building should be examined, as should the activities of local citizens groups and institutions. Potential opinion-swaying advocates and opponents, who will influence the opinions of travelers and commuters, can be divided into the following groups: business groups, environmental groups, grassroots and ideological organizations, government leaders, and transportation professionals.

Business groups. As traffic congestion and its related costs increase and former solutions become less feasible, many cities, states, and regions are searching for alternatives to government-funded transportation. In

some cases, businesses have advocated pricing exemptions for commercial vehicles. But such exemptions may undermine the effectiveness or financial feasibility of the overall pricing scheme or intensify opposition from other motorists.⁹

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⁹Gomez-Ibanez, Jose A., and Kenneth A. Small. *Road Pricing for Congestion Management: A Survey of International Practice*. Transportation Research Board, National Cooperative Highway Research Program, Synthesis of Highway Practice 210, 1994

ity. Although not typically in opposition to toll projects, business groups may object to specific proposals over concerns about disproportionate commercial toll rates, an inability to access properties, or express-lane facilities that don't serve key commercial areas. Finally, business groups may withhold their support for specific projects if the projects aren't articulated as part of an overall system. This last point is particularly relevant whenever a proposed toll corridor leaves local business interests with the impression that only their corridor will be tolled.

Environmental groups. Many environmental groups promote road pricing, although some do not. Those groups that support the concept point to benefits such as reduced



energy use and air pollution, the preservation of open space, and more cost-effective infrastructure investment if the toll or pricing project serves to reduce overall vehicular use or allocates use more efficiently throughout the roadway network. Among the groups that have supported road pricing are Environmental Defense, the Sierra Club, the Tri-State Transportation Coalition (in New York City), the Transit Alliance (in Denver), the Pennsylvania Environmental Council, the Oregon Environmental Council, and the Clean Air Coalition (in Los Angeles). Some environmental groups support pricing with the goal of setting the tolls high enough to reduce driving and then using the revenues to fund nonhighway projects such as rail, transit, or bicycle-path improvements.

Despite this support, environmental groups generally oppose tolls and pricing where new highways or lanes exacerbate greenfield development, encourage urban sprawl, disrupt existing communities, or encourage travel by single-occupant vehicles. For example, the Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission has clashed with environmental advocates regarding the northern expansion of the Mon/Fayette Expressway over various issues, including noise pollution, air quality, and environmental justice. This conflict has contributed to a significant delay in the planned 70-mile, \$3.5-billion toll-system expansion in Pittsburgh.

Such opposition isn't limited to new toll facilities outside of existing travel corridors. Environmental groups have opposed the construction of new express toll lanes on I-10 in Houston as well as the construction of the original SR-91 express toll facility. In both scenarios, only meaningful commitments to HOV benefits have been able to help overcome these concerns.

Grassroots and ideological organizations. Grassroots and ideological organizations may become involved with proposed tolling and pricing projects on an ad hoc basis--both in favor of and in opposition to tolling.

Grassroots groups typically organize themselves in response to a particular element of the proposed program and use extensive media coverage and traditional grassroots techniques to advance their perspectives. For example, citizens in Austin and San Antonio organized the Austin and San Antonio toll parties to oppose proposed toll plans in each city.¹⁰ These groups, similar to most grassroots organizations, form after perceived local impacts of a particular proposed project emerge. Managing the emergence of such groups requires active, extensive, and participatory local involvement in the development of toll projects.

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Conversely, ideological groups generally emerge in response to the concept of tolls rather than because of a particular pricing proposal. As a result, their opposition tends to be regional or statewide rather than local in focus. For example, the Independence Institute, based in Golden, Colorado,¹¹ emerged as a champion of proposed pricing projects in its home state because the projects conformed to perceived "free-market" principles the Institute promoted. Ideological groups may provide support for proposed toll and pricing

policies, but their expectations of those policies' conformity to ideological principles may be unrealistically high given practical implementation concerns. As a result, implementers must reach out to these groups, telling them why practical implementation considerations require a tempering of those expectations.

Government leaders. In dealing with government leaders, attention should be paid to two current trends: a general public distrust of the government

¹⁰ Austin Toll Party, <http://www.texastollparty.com>; San Antonio Toll Party, <http://www.sanantoniottollparty.com>.

¹¹ Independence Institute, <http://www.i2i.org>.



at all levels, and a devolution to local government control. Reflecting their lack of trust, the public has questioned government's ability to effectively manage the revenues as well as the complex technological systems involved with tolling. Furthermore, as evidenced by recent opposition to tolling in Texas, citizens don't accept at face value the fact that declining gas-tax revenues have exacerbated our transportation funding needs. Because of the rapid jump in gasoline prices in 2005 and 2006, many people mistakenly believe that tax revenue increases with fuel-price increases.

The success of current toll projects in California, Minnesota, New York, and Texas combined with increasingly localized project control can help to increase the confidence of both politicians and citizens in tolling. Although congestion doesn't adhere to political boundaries, a shift to local implementation of road pricing may be more efficient.

Transportation professionals. Transportation professionals are a forgotten interest group when it comes to public opinion, yet they have the wherewithal to kill a pricing project before it comes to fruition.¹² Transportation

¹² Ungemah, David, and Myron Swisher. *So You Want to Make a HOT Lane? The Project Manager's Guide for an HOV to HOT Lane Conversion*. Unpublished paper submitted to the Transportation Research Board, 85th Annual Meeting, January 2006.

professionals, including planners, engineers, and economists, are often interested in tolling and pricing as they relate to overall system management, peak-period trip reduction, and revenue generation. To many of these professionals, pricing and tolling should be proposed in conjunction with other elements of a regional transportation strategy, such as land-use regulations, transportation demand—management strategies, intelligent transportation systems technologies, and transit.

Minnesota learned from San Diego's lessons and made marketing and branding a key component of its MnPASS project development.

When gauging support from different interest groups, it is important to keep the goals of the project in mind. Decisions about the use of revenue will be important in maintaining support for the toll facility. For many groups, their support depends almost entirely on how the revenue will be used. For example, environmental groups generally support road pricing if the revenues will be used to foster alternatives to automobile use. Many other supporting interests, in contrast, want revenues to pay for building additional highways and expanded toll lanes. It is a challenge to retain the support of both types of groups without sacrificing the goals of one or the other.

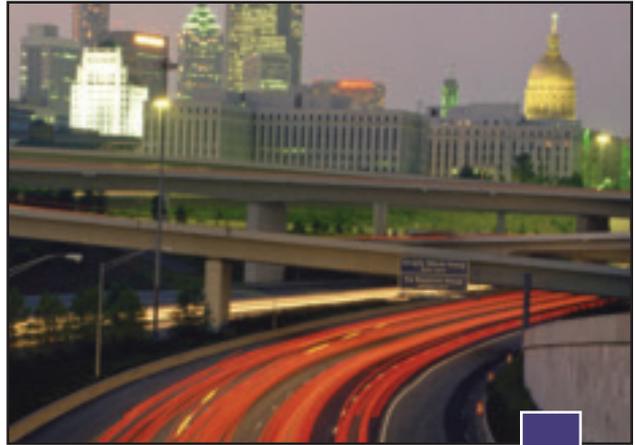
Public-Education Approaches

Public education in the new era of tolling is critical. Efforts to inform the public must consider the geographical and historical context of the projects in question in addition to their related selling points, barriers, and interest groups. Various groups should be targeted in these efforts to ensure that each group obtains information about the issues that concern it most. On the San Diego I-15 project, for example, carpoolers and transit users had the least favorable impression of the program. In response, the project managers assured these customers they would retain top priority and continue to be able to use the lanes for free. If it is the policy of the project to use excess revenues to improve transit and carpool service in the corridor, it is important to make this particular user group aware of that.

In general, few citizens fully understand the current system of transportation financing, and they are unfamiliar with issues such as marginal cost and price elasticity as they relate to transportation. Many people feel that road pricing—in particular differing toll rates by time of day or vehicle occupancy—wouldn't change their travel behavior (or that of others).

Developing a simple message for communicating the concept of pricing can be valuable in gaining public support. For toll facilities, the message can include project progress and construction timing. However, interest groups disinclined to accept new facilities in general (regardless of how they are financed) may exploit general public apprehensiveness about tolling as a point of attack.

Educational efforts are necessary to increase general awareness of why states and regions are exploring tolling. In the early days of the I-15 managed-lane program, project researchers determined that the express lanes lacked an identifiable name, brand, or identity. They recommended that future project managers clearly communicate the goals of the pricing program,



decide on a name for the facility, and tell the public where the money will be spent. Minnesota learned from San Diego's lessons and made marketing and branding a key component of its MnPASS project development.

Across all efforts, there appear to be some general messages that resonate with the public--values of simplicity, efficiency, reliability, and project advancement. Appropriate messages can demonstrate that tolling helps bring projects to fruition now, not 10 years from now. Effective messages can explain the concept of variable pricing so that the public understands there is a maximum toll rate and perceives any downward price variance as a discount.

Travel-time reliability can also be addressed in public-education campaigns. The uncertainty of travel times has led motorists to incorporate large periods of "buffer time" into their trips, which are characterized by early departure times. The reliability provided by road pricing substantially shortens that buffer time, a benefit that pricing proponents can advertise.

There are additional messages that the public understands and that resonate well. The public recognizes, for instance, that toll projects can be built much more quickly than traditionally funded projects. This has been the major selling point for toll projects in Texas, especially when coupled with

the promise that the revenues will be used in the local area, although questions remain about what exactly the revenues will be used for and whether toll-free roads will be neglected. Preparing answers to these questions will serve to reinforce messages supporting tolling.

Overcoming Negativity

The road-pricing and tolling projects mentioned above have employed different methods to measure public acceptance. Regardless of methodology, a significant lesson in the public acceptance of road pricing can be learned from these projects: Initial skepticism about and openly expressed opposition to pricing didn't prevent the projects from carefully and judiciously moving forward. Post-implementation feedback revealed that public attitudes about pricing had shifted from negative to positive as a result of the public having directly experienced pricing's benefits.

Opponents of a facility, regardless of how it is paid for, will use the public's default apprehensiveness about tolls as a reason to try to defeat a project.

New toll corridors, lanes, and bridges will face a different type of scrutiny from the public than will existing corridors; namely, whether there should be a new facility. Ideally, these questions should be addressed in the project's purpose and needs analysis, alternatives assessment, and environmental documentation. The role of tolling shouldn't influence the need for a facility. In reality, however, it often does. Opponents of a facility, regardless of how it is paid for, will use the public's default apprehensiveness about tolls as a reason to try to defeat a project. Again, only through the careful and deliberate process of planning, docu-

menting, and educating the public about proposed projects can negative attitudes toward tolling be overcome.

The political nature of a community and its interest groups should be considered in project planning, but it must be recognized that political climates can change rather drastically. In 1978, for example, the California State Transportation Board suggested that "users should be required to pay a fair share of the costs that occur from their use [of transportation facilities]." This idea was strongly opposed at the time by interest groups.¹³ Tolling in Southern California has since received much support, as evidenced by the success of SR-91, I-15, and SR-125.

¹³Fielding, G. J. *Private Toll Roads: Acceptability of Congestion Pricing in Southern California*. Transportation Research Board Special Report, 1994.

According to the authors of *Road Pricing for Congestion Management*, politically acceptable projects should:¹⁴

- Be fairly simple in design;
- Build incrementally on existing arrangements or previous experience;
- Address clearly understood and widely supported objectives; and
- Incorporate transparent financial flows that facilitate public trust in the use of monies.

The successful tolling and road-pricing projects implemented thus far exhibit these qualities and consequently enjoy a high level of public support. Projects that have failed to become reality or that are encountering strong controversy generally lack one or more of these qualities.

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¹⁴ Small, Kenneth, and Jose Gomez-Ibanez. *Road Pricing for Congestion Management: The Transition from Theory to Practice*. Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 1994.