

# YOSSI SHEFFI

## Blocking traffic

THE CITY of Boston is being asked to consider implementing traffic congestion tolls, following the examples of London, Singapore, Orange County, Calif., and several cities in Norway. Most people abhor government-imposed fees of any kind, but the citizens of Boston should support this one because the benefits far outweigh the drawbacks.

In London the charging system is based on roadside cameras snapping shots of license plates to validate the purchase of a daily, weekly, or annual pass and to fine violators. A Boston city councilor proposed instituting a similar system in some of its more congested neighborhoods such as Chinatown and the financial district.

Congestion pricing offers multiple benefits to the city and the community. In the first place, it would reduce the number of cars driving in the tolled areas, leading to increased average speeds for the remaining cars. This means that those drivers, for whom driving in the city is really important, would be able to do so more efficiently. It also means that significantly less gas would be consumed, leading both to improved air quality and, if implemented nationwide, a lessening of the US dependence on Saudi oil. Gas consumption would go down because there would be fewer vehicles in stop-and-go city traffic areas, and many drivers would choose other means of transportation to travel in and out of Boston.

A congestion charge can also raise significant amounts of money that can be used by the city of Boston to maintain roads, provide parking spaces, and improve mass transit alternatives to accommodate the increased patronage. These monies would be raised, for the most part, from commuters who do not currently pay their fair share for using the services provided by the city of Boston.

Proponents of this eminently reasonable proposal should gear for several lines of criticism. First there is the fear of decreased business activity in the city. The British press wrote about businesses threatening to leave London when the



SELÇUK DEMIREL ILLUSTRATION

congestion charge was imposed. As it turned out, retail activity in London actually *increased* by almost 5 percent in

the charge zone. Furthermore, since the scheme in Boston might cover only rush-hour traffic, it would have little impact on

evening restaurant- and theatergoers and on weekend spending in the city. Other fears included increased traffic on the outskirts of the tolled areas. Measurements in London, however, did not detect any decreased speed in such areas.

To ease the burden on area residents, they could qualify for a discount on the congestion fees, or be exempt, like emergency vehicles and possibly taxicabs.

One should note that the current toll level mentioned in the Boston proposal \$1 to \$5, is low. Even \$5 might not cover the costs of administering the program. In London, at \$9.45 per car per day, almost 80 percent of the revenue is used to cover the program costs in the first five years. Furthermore, only a higher charge

**The  
benefits of a  
toll on cars  
to cut  
congestion.**

(at least \$5) is likely to be effective in actually changing motorists' behavior.

Some concerns, however, still remain, and they should be weighed

against the benefits of the scheme. These include privacy: The city would have monitor automobile traffic and keep a database of payers and their motorized movements. Some economic costs might result from the plan's effect on businesses that depend on low-cost weekday access, in particular parking lot operators in the areas affected.

However, given the expected increased in city productivity, the environmental improvements, the decreased dependence on foreign oil, and the increased revenues to the city that can result from a congestion charge, Boston should take the lead and show the rest of the country that this government mandate is in their best interests.

*Yossi Sheffi is a professor of system engineering and of civil and environmental engineering at MIT*