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POLITICS, PUBLIC OPINION, AND PROJECT DESIGN IN CALIFORNIA ROAD PRICING

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ABSTRACT

Growing numbers of decision-makers are open to charging users to use roads in order to fund transportation improvements, including transit alternatives. Despite significant progress, planners and policy-makers still face many obstacles when considering road pricing projects. This suggests that many of the factors that make proposed road pricing projects successful or unsuccessful are not well understood, which means that proposed projects may contain one or several aspects that prove to be deal-breakers for key supporters. Four geographically diverse California road pricing projects were selected for detailed case study. Two projects that succeeded to implementation allow for an analysis of the critical political maneuvers that occurred throughout the life of these priced facilities. One project ultimately halted in its later stages of planning, and one planned but not yet implemented are useful in evaluating what went wrong and what lessons can be gathered from these attempts to implement road pricing. The findings suggest that there are numerous ways to adjust pricing projects to gain public and political support. Generally, projects should try to provide more capacity, travel time savings, and travel options and avoid pricing facilities with no free alternatives. Nevertheless, how projects are designated and revenues are used is highly context specific and some concessions in one area improve acceptability in another. While the future of road pricing is uncertain, pricing projects should be considered on a case-by-case basis only, depending on local attitudes, the use of the revenue, and the facility in question.

INTRODUCTION

The last 15 years has seen an increase in interest in pricing transportation capacity to both generate revenue and manage transportation demand in California, the nation, and around the world. But despite many advantages, road pricing in particular remains less popular than more traditional finance instruments among most policymakers and the voting public. However, growing numbers of decision-makers are open to charging users to use roads in order to fund transportation improvements, including transit alternatives. But despite significant progress, planners and policy-makers still face many obstacles when considering road pricing projects, suggesting that many factors that make proposed road pricing projects successful or unsuccessful are not well understood. Thus, sometimes subtle adjustments to project design or implementation can win over potential opponents and move a pricing project from proposal to implementation.

Popular discourse would have one believe that the public prefers new sales taxes to road to finance road and transit improvements, will only accept road pricing with parallel free lanes, and will not tolerate pricing on existing capacity. The academic literature on road pricing acceptability supports many of these claims and adds empirical weight to the most critical factors in making road pricing implementable. Specifically, public opinion studies conducted in the United States and the European Union have found that the public and politicians are more likely to accept projects that:

- (1) respond to a serious congestion or environmental concern;
- (2) involve stakeholder groups regarding project details;
- (3) anticipate boundary effects on surrounding areas and develop mitigation measures for alternative routes;
- (4) possess a comprehensive public outreach campaign; and
- (5) expect public support to decline before pricing implementation (*1*).

To complement the findings of transportation pricing studies conducted mostly outside of California, the research reported on in this paper focuses narrowly on the factors that matter most for road pricing to be made politically palatable in California. Value and high-occupancy/toll (HOT) lane pricing in California is examined from the perspectives of multiple stakeholders, and “best practices” for the conception, planning, and implementation of a pricing project are determined.

DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Four geographically diverse California road pricing projects were selected for detailed case study. These four projects have different objectives, project designs, and political courses. The I-15 HOT Lanes in San Diego and the SR-91 Express Lanes in Orange County are two projects that succeeded to implementation and are still currently in place (Figure 1; 2). The two other projects are the Bay Bridge Congestion Pricing Project, which was ultimately halted in its later stages of planning, and the planned but not yet implemented I-680 SMART Carpool Lanes in Alameda County (Figure 1; 3). The auricular planning and political processes that occurred in each of these projects are explored, and opinion and insight on road pricing’s promise from those who have been closely involved in the pricing debate is provided.

The authors conducted interviews for this study from October through December 2005. The initial interview subjects were selected using publicly available information on the projects selected for study, and subsequent subjects were selected through interviewee referrals. The initial contacts were made by email and telephone, while the interviews were conducted both by telephone and in person. Interviews were structured so as to elicit answers to specific questions but also to allow stakeholders to initiate and expand on topics of their choosing.

IMPLEMENTED PROJECTS

The Importance of a Political Champion: I-15 FasTrak HOT Lanes

Background

The I-15 HOT Lanes are two formerly underused high-occupancy vehicle (HOV) lanes on an eight mile highway facility in San Diego. Vehicles with two or more people use the facility for free, while single occupancy vehicles (SOV) pay a toll that varies by level of congestion. The one-way trip price is calculated every six minutes by level of congestion on the facility, and variable signs display the current charge near the entrance of the facility. Revenues are dedicated to operations and funding the Inland Breeze Express Bus Service from Rancho Bernardo to downtown San Diego.

As one of the first variable road pricing projects undertaken in the United States, it was not initially conceived of as either a demand management tool or an experiment in road pricing, but rather as a means to fund transit service in the I-15 corridor. In the early 1990s, the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG), the metropolitan planning organization (MPO) for San Diego County, developed a network of trolley lines that did not include the I-15 corridor due to a dearth of funding. Jan Goldsmith, former Mayor of the City of Poway, became convinced of the insufficient funds from traditional sources for improved transit service between the inland I-15 corridor and downtown (4). SANDAG suggested converting the underused HOV lanes constructed in the 1980s to HOT lanes and using the revenues to fund transit, and brought the proposal to state and federal agencies at the same time that Goldsmith was elected to the State Assembly in 1992. Goldsmith carried state legislation allowing SOV to buy onto the San Diego HOV facility and called on the federal government for support, which came from the Congestion Pricing Pilot Program (CPPP) as part of 1991 ISTEA legislation.

Political Actors

The political course of the project was unique among California transportation pricing projects. Goldsmith was a remarkably active supporter of the I-15 HOT Lanes; he viewed his role in the project as one of opening the public debate and marshalling support from policymakers (4). Goldsmith believed the project would only be successful with a vocal supporter, and authored numerous op-ed pieces and frequented local talk radio shows to discuss the project plans.

Goldsmith not only encouraged public discourse and ushered the project through SANDAG board approval but also moved the project through federal and state legislative obstacles in his subsequent role as a State Assembly member. He sponsored Assembly Bill 713, passed into law in October 1994, allowing SOV on state HOV capacity so long as the facility maintained a traffic level-of-service rating (which range from “A,” unobstructed free-flowing

traffic, to “F,” forced-flow congestion), of “B.” He further gained the support of all SANDAG board members, and held one-on-one meetings with his colleagues in San Diego County to which he would bring traffic planners along to answer questions about the project (4). This work was done in advance of introducing the legislation to gather support from nearly every elected official in San Diego County whose district was affected. Because it was a district bill, even legislators who were philosophically opposed to road pricing, such as President Pro-Tem Bill Lockyer, were amenable to allowing the bill to pass (4). Despite interest groups opposition from the Automobile Club of Southern California, Goldsmith was able to push the legislation through.

Public Opinion

Selling the project to the public was not difficult because the HOV capacity was widely perceived as underused and the toll revenues were explicitly earmarked for a new transit line. The two major concerns voiced were the Lexus Lanes argument—that the wealthy drive on uncongested lanes while the rest of the public remain in congestion, and the Double-Taxation argument—that the roads are already paid for through taxes (5). Goldsmith responded to these criticisms by explaining that only one-third the capacity of the HOV lanes were being used and San Diego needed to fund a transit line in the corridor (4). The debates over the HOT lane motivated the transit line’s planners to make it highly visible. SANDAG pursued a carefully concerted outreach and marketing plan, evaluating public attitudes toward pricing the HOV for SOV use. Once in the implementation phase, a marketing strategy was developed to include an I-15 Express Lane newsletter and town hall style meetings. SANDAG took special care to effectively communicate the program’s uses and benefits to the media.

Appraisal

Interviewees had differing assessments of the HOT Lane project’s success. Kim Kawada of SANDAG believes the multi-agency planning approach and the federal contribution made implementation smooth (5). Still, it took longer than expected to receive federal funds from the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans). Caltrans had fiduciary responsibility for funding, but the novelty of the concept delayed this funding by almost two years due to confusion over the paperwork. Kawada believes overall the project’s three goals: 1) to use excess capacity on the HOV lanes, 2) to test an innovative concept, and 3) to raise revenue to fund a bus line in the corridor, were met despite recent revenue issues (5). As the project reached implementation, and excess capacity on the HOV facility is being used, the first two goals were reached (6). Derek Toups of SANDAG states that outside factors, such as regional growth and congestion on connecting facilities, are slowing revenue growth, and SANDAG is forced to fully fund the transit line by drawing on reserves from earlier years because it is not generating enough new revenue (7).

Goldsmith, now a Superior Court Judge, believes more efficiency can be extracted from the bus system (4). Transportation consultant Alan Hoffman agrees and criticizes that the transit service has not been conceived as part of a network (8). Ridership is fairly low, and while new utility was created, a majority of riders were already using transit as their primary mode of travel before the new busline was introduced (6).

Goldsmith’s experience shows that elected officials who are interested in pursuing road pricing policy should first ensure that the project fulfills a need in a more efficient and effective

manner than the alternatives and then make a commitment to provide long-term political support. Goldsmith believes the value of road pricing as a public policy, and a project should be supported or opposed on a case-by-case basis (4). He stresses, as does much of the theory and research on road pricing acceptability (1; 9), that revenue-raising should be the objective of pricing projects and the funds should go toward highly visibility improvements related to the project. Kawada (5) believes road pricing has a future as a way to manage existing transportation capacity, and notes that the flexible funding it provides is advantageous for local planning entities.

Widespread, if Sometimes Grudging, Stakeholder Support: The SR-91 Express Lanes

Background

The 91 Express Lanes is a four-lane, 10-mile toll road built in the median of California's Riverside Freeway (State Route 91) between the Orange/Riverside County line and the Costa Mesa Freeway (State Route 55). When constructed, it was the world's first fully automated, open toll facility, and when the facility opened in 1995 it was the only variable-priced road project in the world. Tolls vary by time-of-day and day-of-week based on congestion levels, allowing the facility to generally maintain free traffic flow even during peak periods. The Orange County Transportation Authority (OCTA) owns the facility, while the former private owner, Cofiroute, continues to operate and manage the facility under contract.

This type of tolled facility, with private-sector participation, was promoted by Caltrans in the 1980s, inspired in part by a policy study written Robert Poole, Director of Transportation for the Reason Foundation (10). Despite voter suspicion of toll projects, enabling legislation was passed to permit their creation in 1988. This came in part because Caltrans appreciated the benefits such a project would provide in terms of increased throughput, and also because funding for new capacity construction projects was limited. The state also sought to reassign the risks involved in such an innovative project from the taxpayer to a private entity.

Political Actors

The SR-91 Express Lanes project did not have an easy political birth. The California Legislature acted only because a statewide bond issue for highway improvements had just narrowly failed at the polls (10). Daryl Watkins (11) of OCTA reports that the specific project was generally supported by his agency, because the paramount concern was the desperate need for new capacity in this highly congested corridor. Watkins explains that the project has involved an educational process, and, echoing a common theme regarding elected officials, board members were quick to understand the revenue-raising power of tolls. He further asserts that many elected officials support tolling simply for the revenue potential (11). As might be predicted, elected officials were slower to grasp the efficiency arguments, and persuasion was necessary. Today, however, board members do appreciate the ability of the Express Lanes to increase throughput. Board members are willing to explain to their constituents the necessity of raising tolls in order to maintain free-flowing conditions, indicating an understanding of the mechanics of variable tolling (10). Proof of the OCTA's commitment to this model comes from the fact that it is now actively considering new tolling projects.

The project's advisory board allows OCTA to foster working relationships. Caltrans, a strong supporter of the project, sits on the board and has a “very amicable relationship” with OCTA (11). At first the Riverside County Transportation Commission (RCTC) was strongly opposed to the project because Riverside County was not consulted despite the fact that most drivers in the corridor are Riverside County residents (12). Today, Riverside County has been brought into the decision making process through its membership on an advisory board that oversees the project, mollifying some of the RCTC's concerns. An important lesson seems to be that consultation with affected constituencies and stakeholders should take place early and often to ensure that this type of potentially controversial project is smoothly implemented.

Private Sector Involvement

Cofiroute, the world's leader in private-sector tolling projects, was selected to proceed with a project in the SR-91 corridor. Their ownership was short, however, due to the biggest political problem in the history of the SR-91 Express lanes, the “non-compete clause.” This forbade the construction of new capacity along the corridor by Caltrans and the OCTA. At the time the facility was built, Poole (10) noted, “no one had ever done a toll road with free competition literally a couple feet away.” As a result of nervous investors, the non-compete clause was included, and the public authorities did not consider this to be a major concession since there were no funds for expansion of the mixed flow capacity regardless. However, the non-compete clause engendered political ill-will, and OCTA bought out the facility in 2003 for \$207.5 million. While Poole (10) argues that the project was only a success due to the legislation that allowed a private company to come forward with a business model, Watkins asserts that the SR-91 project has been more successful under public ownership. Private sector involvement is noted as not necessary, and there is a debate over the level of innovation brought by a private firm (10; 11).

Public Opinion

The perception of public support of the project is debated. Dan Beal (13) of the Automobile Club of Southern California believes it is the voluntary nature of the Express Lanes that makes them palatable to motorists, who are willing to reap the time benefits yet use the facility grudgingly (16; 12). Poole (10) notes that variable tolling receives high levels of public support, citing studies from the I-15 corridor; this is further reinforced by customer testimonies that they would pay much more than the current toll for a traffic-free commute (11).

Despite perceptions that value-priced lanes will serve only the wealthy, the lanes are used by a broad swathe of the public (14, 11). Empirical data show that while wealthier drivers use value-priced facilities more than less well-off drivers, all motorists use the lanes when the value of their time is high (10; 11; 14); this is also an argument against lifeline pricing. Beal (13) asserts that the continued maintenance of parallel free capacity is important so that there is still a choice for those who cannot or will not pay. It should be noted that Cofiroute stated that equity is no more of an issue for the product than it is for any product developer, and this sentiment was echoed by OCTA (14; 11).

Appraisal

If the stakeholders above are to be believed, the project must fundamentally be considered a success. All of those interviewed understand the potential of tolling to raise revenue and support study for this reason. Beal (13) argues that tolling is an important new source of capital, noting that “it takes a tremendous funding burden off the traditional sources.” Weikel (15) of *The Los Angeles Times* also believes tolling is perhaps the most expedient source of revenue for capacity expansion projects. Beal (13) questions whether pricing is the wave of tomorrow, as “the translation to reality is extremely difficult.” He however believes the “underlying economics of pricing are sound,” particularly given the waning power of the fuels taxes (13).

Poole (10) believes that the two California pricing projects discussed thus far put congestion tolling on the map. He supports this statement pointing to increased ridesharing and overall decreases in congestion (10; 15; 12). Moreover, he recognizes the ability of these projects to raise revenue. It is this latter argument that leads the other participants to say that pricing will move ahead. Weikel (15) suggests that pricing will succeed primarily because it is an expedient and politically palatable way to raise funds for capacity expansion. For this reason, he sees elected officials being drawn to this model in the future.

Interestingly, while there seems to be universal agreement on the efficacy of tolling as a revenue-raising device, there is some dispute over its ability to effectively manage demand. Beal (13) emphasizes that the elasticity of demand for travel is limited. If roads are priced high enough to change behavior, according to Beal, they will raise a large amount of funds, however, if roads are only priced enough to maintain them or improve transit, he asserts that there will not be much change in behavior (13). Beal suggests that support will erode if voters realize tolling is being used as a means of changing travel behavior. Therefore, planners must tread carefully when it comes to foisting social engineering on the public (10).

One of the most contentious issues is whether the tolled lanes have increased throughput. Weikel and Beal (15; 13) speculate that the volumes carried by the tolled lanes are small, however it is noted that increased ridesharing might tip the balance in favor of the priced lanes. Haley of the RCTC (12) believes that speeds in the priced lanes are too high, and that lower tolls, which would result in higher volumes, would promote greater throughput. Ramirez and Poole (14; 10) strongly maintain that throughputs on the priced lanes are vastly greater than on the adjacent free lanes. During Friday peak, the two tolled lanes handle the same amount of traffic as the four adjacent general-purpose lanes (14; 10). Given the fact that even experts like Weikel, Haley, and Beal do not believe throughputs are indeed higher, it would seem as if pricing proponents must do a better job disseminating their data if the efficiency argument is to take hold (15; 12; 13).

UNIMPLEMENTED PROJECTS

Encouraging, if Slow, Progress: The I-680 SMART Carpool Lanes

Background

The I-680 SMART Carpool Lanes are being developed through the Sunol Smart Carpool Lane Joint Powers Authority (JPA). It is a joint project between the Alameda County Transportation Improvement Authority (ACTIA), the Alameda County Congestion Management Agency (ACCM), and the Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority (VTA). The HOT Lane project was initiated because the growth in “dot com” boom traffic along the corridor made it the second

most congested corridor in the Bay Area. Although the burst of the “dot com” bubble has decreased the traffic volumes significantly, John Ristow (16) of the VTA believes traffic volumes on I-680 will rise again to make this corridor one of the most highly congestion corridors again.

The project still faces many challenges. The project was developed with the help of supporting state legislation; however, these projects include legislative reporting requirements, which, according to Randy Rentschler of the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC), the MPO of the nine county Bay Area, suggest that there is a political wariness about the provisions (17). The recent drop in traffic levels along the corridor has diminished the urgency of implementation because high traffic levels are often a key motivating factor for transportation pricing projects. However, those interviewed for this case study suggest that the JPA has politically positioned the new lane well, through extensive marketing, public outreach, and clearly defining their mission to stakeholders.

Traffic Levels

Conventional wisdom holds that chronically high traffic levels can contribute to popular support for road pricing projects (18). However, Dennis Fay (19) of the ACCMA believes that decreased traffic volumes may actually bode well for this pilot project. The travel time difference between the HOT Lane and the adjacent free lanes will not be large because of the reduced traffic levels, and therefore those in the free lanes will not feel they are utilizing a severely inferior facility. He believes this is a strong start for the proposed MTC HOT Lane network, as choosing a corridor that is not severely congested allows the project a better chance for success because agencies will have the opportunity to make adjustments as needed without having an unbearable impact on traffic (19).

Marketing and Branding

The keys to success to date for the JPA have been (1) speaking with members of the traveling public to hear about their perceptions and needs, and (2) incorporating that feedback into marketing plans. After an extensive survey, the project was named to emphasize that carpool lanes will be preserved, which helped increase public acceptance of the project from 58 to 78 percent (19; 20). Another important marketing feature was to keep the technology consistent with other technologies already implemented in California. The project incorporates the FasTrak transponder used on the Southern California road pricing facilities and many toll bridges in the state, and thus does not require users to purchase or switch to a new technology. Ristow (16) further argues that Santa Clara County residents, and therefore voters, will support the project because of the strong auto-orientation in that part of the Bay Area, and because alternatives to driving are limited given existing land use patterns.

An important step in the planning of the Carpool Lane, according to those interviewed, has been to clearly define the goals of the project. Rentschler (17) stated that if the success of the project is defined in terms of either revenue generation or significant reductions in traffic delay, then the projections suggest that it will not be a successful project. This is due to the decreased traffic levels discussed. However, the goal of regional mobility is both attainable by the project and vital to the HOT Lane network proposed by the MTC (17). Because the Carpool Lane is the first segment of the network, its success is tied to the overall goal of regional

mobility of the MTC. Ristow (16) believes that a successful project will lead to widespread acceptance of tolled facilities and improve regional mobility. However, both John Holtzclaw, Chair of the National Transportation Committee of the Sierra Club, and Laura Stuchinsky of the Silicon Valley Leadership Group (21; 22) agree that HOT Lanes should be a revenue source for improved transit and a tool to reduce emissions from vehicles in highway traffic, and not an improvement to the system that facilitates faster traffic and in turn encourages increased solo automobile use.

Money Matters

Several of those interviewed suggested that the question of who should collect the revenues has yet to be resolved. Some have suggested that local agencies, such as the ACCMA or ACTIA, should collect the revenues instead of regional agencies like the MTC, prompted by a fear that revenues will be diverted away from the project corridor and toward other regional projects. This is important as the marketing studies show clearly that the public had a higher level of project acceptance when the revenues from toll collections were explicitly earmarked for corridor-specific improvements (19).

Beyond questions of who collects the revenue, revenue usage is also an unresolved topic. Because the VTA is a transit operator in the project area, VTA staff tend to see the revenues from the corridor as best invested in transit (16). This is in direct contrast to the requests of the AAA: that that toll revenues should be dedicated to highway maintenance and capacity increases (20). Overall, according to those interviewed, it is more palatable if money goes to improvements in the project corridor, rather than to what the public often perceives as “lining the coffers” of other agencies or interests. However, what those improvements will be is yet to be determined.

Political Victim: The Bay Bridge Congestion Pricing Project

Background

The San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge is one of the most heavily traveled and congested transportation links in the State of California. In the early 1990's, the Bay Area Congestion Pricing Task Force was formed to develop a plan for variable pricing on the Bay Bridge to address traffic congestion between San Francisco and communities in the East Bay. The Task Force represented a broad range of transportation, commercial, and environmental interests, supported in part through the CPPP.

In many ways, the Bay Bridge is an attractive candidate for variable pricing. The facility is severely congested and expanding capacity along the Bay Bridge corridor is limited by financial and political constraints. Tolling infrastructure already exists on the Bridge and motorists are already conditioned to paying tolls to use the facility. Despite these favorable qualities, a combination of factors contributed to the eventual abandonment the Bay Bridge congestion pricing project.

Political Actors

Unlike many successful variable pricing projects, the effort to implement congestion pricing on the Bay Bridge was not backed by an influential local political champion. While some individual politicians were against raising tolls on the Bridge and opposed the project as a matter of principle, the majority of political attention concerning the Bay Bridge was devoted to the broader political debate concerning who would finance seismic repairs on the Bay Bridge and other state bridges damaged by the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake (23). The conflict centered on whether state or regional funds would be used to finance seismic work on state bridges in the Bay Area. Influential local state legislators were reluctant to support congestion pricing, in part, because it would undermine legislative support for state funding of the seismic bridge work if it was shown that the same revenue could be generated regionally from congestion toll rates (23).

Public Opinion

The fate of congestion pricing on the Bay Bridge ultimately rested in political hands, as the plan to increase tolls during certain periods would have required legislative approval. Holzclaw (21) supported variable pricing on the Bay Bridge, but emphasized that politicians are hesitant to back tolling projects because they are worried about getting on the wrong side of public opinion. It was a difficult task to generate favorable public opinion for congestion pricing on the Bay Bridge as the project was the first serious attempt to implement congestion pricing on a highway facility in the United States. Frick (23), a MTC Project Manager at the time of the Bay Bridge congestion pricing project, recalled the inherent difficulty of being the first United States project: Without an application of highway congestion pricing in the United States, the Task Force had only international case studies available to cite in convincing the public that congestion pricing could work.

Money Matters

Variable pricing applications, like the Bay Bridge plan, are multifaceted, in that they have separate, but also complementary revenue generation and traffic management dimensions. Variable pricing projects should include both dimensions, and neither dimension is enough alone (17). Ristow (16) also emphasized that variable pricing projects are capable of generating substantial revenues, but their value is really defined by traffic and congestion management.

Though it is cautioned that revenue generation should not be the primary focus of variable pricing projects, nonetheless, project officials must establish strategically acceptable planning for the allocation of toll proceeds. Shortly after the initial effort of the Task Force to adopt congestion pricing on the Bay Bridge, Frick et al. (24) identified several lessons learned including achieving revenue neutrality, addressing equity concerns, and allocating excess revenues. Numerous interviewees stressed the importance of keeping excess revenue within the project corridor. Ristow (16) also emphasized that excess revenues should be kept within the project corridor to enhance transit options.

Appraisal

The plan developed for variable pricing on the Bay Bridge by the Task Force represented one of the first attempts to adopt such a strategy in the United States. Though the Task Force was unable to implement congestion pricing on the Bay Bridge, it is not to imply that the experience

did not possess value. New approaches to current projects and the past reflections of many transportation stakeholders in the Bay Area demonstrate that the lessons from the Bay Bridge congestion pricing plan have indeed been learned.

Variable pricing on the Bay Bridge remains an intriguing policy option. The qualities that made the Bay Bridge an attractive candidate for congestion pricing in the 1990's are still largely valid, and recent strategies to reduce travel demand by increasing flat toll rates have yet to significantly reduce traffic congestion. However, a new breed of variable pricing projects, like HOT lanes and managed lanes, are now receiving attention in several metropolitan areas across the country. In the Bay Area, discussion of variable pricing on the Bay Bridge has been largely sidelined by this new focus. Given the large agenda and range of issues faced by the State Legislature, MPOs must carefully select which projects they pursue at the state level (17). Pressing for legislative authority to implement HOT lanes, rather than authority for variable pricing on the Bay Bridge, makes sense given the proven revenues and congestion relief that other statewide HOT projects have generated.

CONCLUSIONS

Given the inconsistency of conventional wisdom and scholarship on implementing road pricing, it is not surprising to find varied opinions from respondents, including some suggestions that fly in the face of factors that have actually been shown to work in implemented projects. What are elected and agency officials to make of these disparate suggestions on increasing political and public acceptance of road pricing? First, the inferences made in this paper are perhaps not always generalizable to other projects. Like most political phenomena, their successes are highly context specific and should provide those interested in instituting pricing more in the way of possibilities than hard and fast rules. Nevertheless, several themes emerge from the responses of the interviewees. In this section the factors most commonly cited for successfully implementing road pricing are revisited.

Project Design

Almost everyone interviewed agreed that, all else being equal, projects that provide more choice to travelers—in the way of transit options, carpooling incentives, and faster travel times—are most highly valued by the public. None of the projects discussed here are pure toll roads, though private toll road construction is on the rise in California. The most contentious pricing design discussed in this study was the Bay Bridge Congestion Pricing Project, which sought to raise the existing toll on the bridge. Although a bridge toll with no comparable alternative free routes was already in place, the project did not succeed partially because the public did not support a higher charge on all bridge lanes and so it was seen as unfair, punitive, and excessive. The I-15, SR-91, and I-680 projects institute a new charge, but free comparable alternatives to paying the charge remain intact. It is perhaps this provision of choice that contributed to the relatively smooth implementation of tolling on the Southern California lanes.

Political Champions

Having a political champion was not necessary in the case of the SR-91 Express Lanes; the policy was conceived and carried to implementation by an agency “champion” in Caltrans. The

public sector needed a way to finance capacity expansion, so they enlisted the private sector. Likewise, the I-680 has substantial agency support for the project but few identifiable political champions. The failed Bay Bridge project had strong multi-agency and broad electoral support, but was unable to overcome the opposition of powerful legislators. While for the I-15 HOT Lanes, Goldsmith provided not only the impetus to discuss road pricing but also the political support and advocacy necessary to carry the policy to implementation. So while a political champion may be beneficial to respond directly to active critics, agency support is sometimes sufficient. That said, elected officials have particular expertise dealing with the public and political opposition, and their support would serve road pricing proposals well.

Marketing the Objective to Political Actors

Perhaps the least understood factor affecting pricing's acceptability is the publicly stated objective of the road pricing project. Road pricing has the potential to achieve several different objectives simultaneously, though to varying degrees of success depending on project design. The two objectives most often cited are raising revenue and managing congestion. Even these simple objectives can be spun to elected officials in a number of ways. Raising revenue can be marketed to replace existing taxes, fund the transportation system, fund the construction of new capacity, or subsidize automobile substitutes; congestion management can be marketed as "time-savings."

Most of those who were interviewed believed the advantage elected officials see in road pricing is its revenue raising potential. In garnering support for the I-15 HOT lanes, SANDAG's objective-setting strategy was primarily to advertise the revenue raising potential. Moreover, the two successful projects funded substantive transportation facility improvements, as the public and elected officials find returning revenues to nearby transportation most palatable.

Marketing the Objective to the Public

It is unclear if raising revenue or managing congestion should be the motivation behind a marketing plan to the public regarding pricing. The respondents fell on both sides of this debate. For the private and public operators of the SR-91 Express Lanes, time-savings was perceived as the only reason the public would be willing to accept priced roads. While the charges on these roads financed capacity expansion, the toll facility operators overwhelmingly emphasize its time-savings benefits. Interviewees from the Bay Bridge and I-680 project likewise encouraged use of the congestion management objective for future road pricing projects.

The political argument not currently being properly wielded by pricing advocates is empirical data showing priced facilities offer improved throughput and system efficiency. This should be a strong political tool for those who support pricing projects. Yet, surprisingly, many motorists, representatives of the media, elected officials and even transportation professionals believe priced capacity handles fewer cars than parallel free alternatives. In order to utilize the throughput argument effectively to gain public and political support, pricing advocates need to do a better job collecting and disseminating data showing that pricing is the most effective method to increase throughput.

Overcoming Opposition

The experience of the failed Bay Bridge project suggests to the interviewees that, for pricing policy to be instituted, it should be the only option available. This assertion implies that the public is more opposed to road pricing than any other feasible policy option. While the public opinion research in the United States and the rest of the world tend to support this hypothesis, public opinion changes in the face of experience, so that what was once unmentionable becomes common public policy. The high traffic levels on the two Southern California facilities point to the possibility of a shift in public sentiment toward road pricing.

Supportive legislation is also key for implementing pricing projects. As such, those interested in implementing pricing would be advised, according to the interviewees, to use advocacy and political tactics wisely. Opponents of pricing rely on catch phrases of “Double-Taxation” and “Lexus Lanes” to excite the public. For road pricing to become publicly acceptable, proponents need to make use of its promise to market the policy.

Final Remarks

As congestion continues to grow in built-up areas, capacity expansions become increasingly difficult and expensive. Road pricing provides an innovative option, but the future of pricing is uncertain. Some of those interviewed believe it has a bright future, and that it is only solution that will make a serious dent in congestion and transportation revenue needs in the years ahead. It is also seen by many as an opportunity to improve a corridor facility and benefit transit. Still other proponents see tolls as providing choice and premium service thought to be things of value to motorists today. There remain, however, many who are undecided or hostile to road pricing. They support pricing when it increases options for motorists, but are wary of compulsory programs such as area pricing. Many stakeholders interviewed said that pricing projects should be considered on a case-by-case basis only, depending on local attitudes, the use of the revenue, and the facility in question. On balance, however, the political future of road pricing would appear auspicious, provided that carefully tailored to address local concerns, meet local needs, and generate local revenues.

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LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

FIGURE 1 **California road pricing project location maps.**

I-15 HOT Lanes

SR-91 Express Lanes

I-680 SMART Carpool Lanes

FIGURE 1 California road pricing project location maps.