



TA Board of Directors  
Meeting of March 5, 2026

Correspondence as of February 13, 2026

# Subject

1. Impact of highway volume on local congestion
2. Fwd: Transportation & Climate Blog: Let's be Honest About Highway Expansions

**From:** [Mike Swire](#)  
**Subject:** Impact of highway volume on local congestion  
**Date:** Monday, February 9, 2026 11:27:08 AM  
**Attachments:** [How Manhattan's Congestion Toll Speeds Up Trips in the Suburbs - Bloomberg.pdf](#)

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Dear SMCTA Board and CAC,

I thought you might be interested in [the attached article](#) on the impact that NYC's congestion pricing program has had on local congestion outside of the City. This has important analogs for SM County as we decide whether or not to increase highway traffic.

In the article, David Zipper (a great transportation writer - [subscribe here](#)) describes a hidden benefit of the congestion pricing program: it reduced traffic congestion on local streets outside of Manhattan. Overall driving in the suburbs decreased instead of simply displacing drivers to other streets.

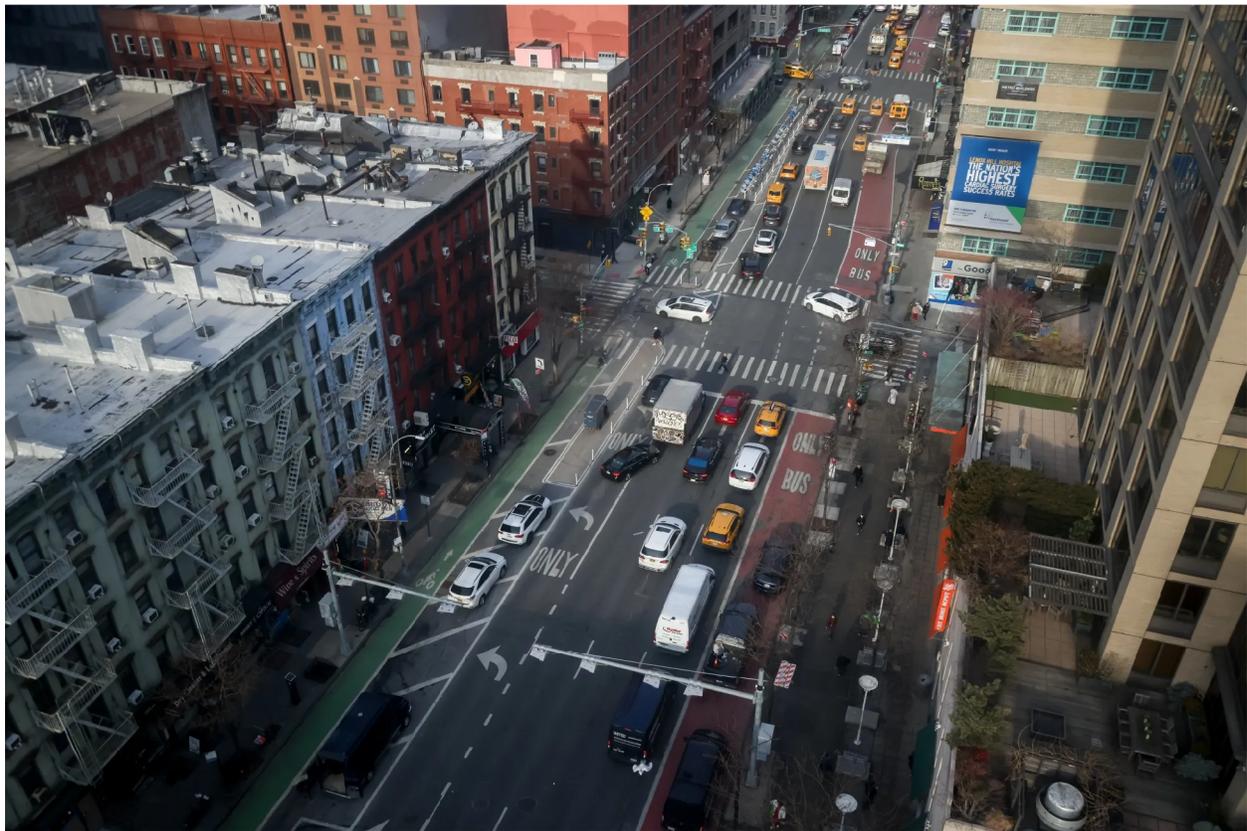
Thus, before encouraging more driving on local highways, we must acknowledge the impact that it will have on local streets, too. More drivers on the highway means more drivers on the roads leading to the highway.

Mike Swire  
(writing on my own behalf)

CityLab | Perspective

# Congestion Pricing's Unexpected Winners: Suburban Drivers

NYC's controversial toll program hasn't just sped up trips inside Manhattan, a new paper finds. It's easing traffic in outer boroughs and neighboring counties.



License-plate-scanning cameras over First Avenue enforce New York City's year-old congestion pricing program. *Photographer: Michael Nagle/Bloomberg*

By [David Zipper](#)

January 30, 2026 at 5:00 AM PST

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**✦✦ Takeaways** by Bloomberg AI ^

- Data collected since the congestion pricing program began in January 2025 show that Manhattan's streets are indeed flowing faster, with taxis and buses reporting quicker trips inside the congestion relief zone.
- The majority of drivers' time savings has accrued to those traveling outside the toll zone entirely – for instance, those commuting from Brooklyn to Queens or within Northern New Jersey.
- There is no evidence that drivers seeking to avoid the toll have slowed journeys in places like Staten Island or the Bronx, and roadways throughout the NY tri-state area got at least a little bit faster.

Along with upgrading transit service, a top goal of New York City's congestion pricing program has been untangling gridlock within Manhattan's central business district.

“The project's purpose is to reduce traffic congestion in the Manhattan CBD,” MTA official Allison de Cerreño declared in 2022, more than two years before most drivers began paying \$9 to enter parts of the island during peak hours.

Data collected since the program began in January 2025 show that Manhattan's streets are indeed flowing faster, with taxis and buses reporting quicker trips inside the congestion relief zone. But here is a twist: The majority of drivers' time savings has accrued to those traveling outside the toll zone entirely – for instance, those commuting from Brooklyn to Queens or within Northern New Jersey.

## Bloomberg CityLab

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**For These Old Bus Stations, It's Not the End of the Line**

While Manhattan has been in the spotlight, local trips taken by people in outer boroughs and suburbs – places home to many of congestion pricing's most vociferous critics – have reclaimed the most travel time. Contrary to widespread fears, there is no evidence that drivers seeking to avoid the toll have slowed journeys in places like Staten Island or the Bronx.

That is the unexpected finding of a new National Bureau of Economic Research working paper. A group led by Yale economist Cody Cook, Stanford economist Shoshana Vasserman, and Google researcher Aboudy Kreidieh used detailed trip data from Google to reach their conclusions, which offer lessons not just for New Yorkers, but also for those hoping to introduce congestion pricing elsewhere. Drivers, it appears, need not go downtown to come out ahead.



Congestion Relief Zone signage at 5th Avenue in New York City in 2025. *Photographer: Michael Nagle/Bloomberg*

The new study capitalizes on the near-ubiquity of digital wayfinding applications that have surged in popularity since cities like London, Stockholm and Singapore implemented congestion pricing decades ago. The coauthors analyzed anonymized Google Maps trips from September 2024 to June 2025, encompassing the months before and after congestion pricing's launch in Manhattan. By comparing speed changes on New York City-area roadways with contemporaneous trends in other US regions, the researchers were able to isolate and measure congestion pricing's effects.

Cook, one of the lead authors, said that the study is the first to estimate congestion pricing's impact on both Manhattan-

bound trips and journeys that never cross into the toll zone at all.

As they expected, the researchers determined that the \$9 charge has sped up vehicle journeys into Manhattan, nudging some people who would otherwise drive at peak times to instead ride transit, drive earlier or later, or forgo the trip entirely. Because traffic thinned, those still opting to enter Manhattan by car saved roughly 83,000 hours per week, averaging around three minutes per journey, according to the NBER paper.

But drivers who never ventured into the toll zone also saved time: As a group, this cohort, including those traveling within Bergen County or from the Bronx to Brooklyn, racked up savings exceeding 461,000 hours per week. An average journey became just eight seconds faster, but because there were over 100 times more of them than Manhattan-bound trips, their aggregated savings were more than five times greater.

**Read More:** [New York's Congestion Pricing Is Working. Five Charts Show How](#)

To understand why congestion pricing's total time savings mostly accrued to those traveling outside Manhattan, consider that most drivers heading into the island traverse roadways outside the congestion relief zone as they approach it from Long Island, New Jersey or wherever they began their

journey. By shrinking the number of peak-time cars flowing into the toll zone, congestion pricing reduces traffic on outlying roadways, where remaining drivers – including those who never had Manhattan on their itinerary – can now go faster.

The authors found that congestion pricing's power to reduce travel times was strongest on highways close to Manhattan and weaker on local streets that are more peripheral. "As we look farther and farther from the central business district, the effects on speeds become increasingly small as there are fewer and fewer CBD-bound drivers," Cook said.

Even so, roadways throughout the NY tri-state area got at least a little bit faster: Car trips on Long Island, for instance, sped up by an average of 2.3%.

Better yet, the coauthors wrote that they found "no evidence of offsetting slowdowns on different road types ... suggesting that the policy reduced overall traffic volumes rather than simply displaced congestion." That conclusion refutes critics' predictions that congestion pricing would shift drivers toward suburban roadways that would slow to a crawl.

Such findings align with a report published last June by the Regional Plan Association, which determined that congestion pricing had reduced traffic jams on roads outside Manhattan, although it did not distinguish between Manhattan- and non-Manhattan-bound trips. (A host of other positive effects, from

reduced air pollution to improved foot traffic and economic impacts in the CBD, have also been observed.)



Traffic approaches the Lincoln Tunnel in Weehawken, New Jersey. *Photographer: Michael Nagle/Bloomberg*

Cook said that he himself was surprised by the team’s findings. So was Kate Slevin, executive vice president at the Regional Plan Association, who has promoted congestion pricing for over a decade. For years, she said, advocates seldom emphasized congestion pricing’s benefits for trips outside Manhattan, even though many of the policy’s most fervent opponents seldom entered the toll zone. The policy’s suburban foes “probably would have said they expected no effect at all on their [daily] driving,” Slevin said, and they resented the idea of paying a fee for their occasional ventures into the city.

According to the new paper, such drivers have benefited from a policy they lambasted. “There is a really strong case for everyone in New Jersey to care about this,” Slevin said, “even if you’re not going to be using the tunnel” to drive into Manhattan.

She suspects that many drivers in the suburbs and outer boroughs still don’t appreciate what congestion pricing has given them. “Individually, it’s not that much time, so you might not recognize it,” she said. Evidence like the new NBER paper might win over skeptics. “If there’s data to back it up, that’s a potential benefit” to future advocacy efforts, she said.



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Beyond New York, those proposing congestion pricing in other cities might want to include a talking point about faster trips outside a newly tolled downtown. “There is no question that the qualitative benefits that the authors found in NYC can be replicated in other metropolitan areas,” said Clifford Winston, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution who was not involved in the study. Winston said he found the NBER study to be “careful” and its conclusions “credible.”

The NBER coauthors considered which other US regions might experience comparable improvements for vehicle trips

outside the central business district. Cook explained their thinking: “You can imagine a world where everyone going to the CBD is coming from immediately outside of it, or they’re just traveling on roads that are at free flow. Then there’s really no point of congestion pricing,” he said. “The other extreme is that everyone is traveling from the furthest possible reaches of the region, and they’re traveling on super-congested roads. We’d expect there to be big effects: People are coming from far away, so they’re traveling a ton of roads, and they’re congesting all those roads.”

Two regions that fare well under the researchers’ criteria are Boston and Chicago – both of which have local leaders who have already been weighing congestion-based tolls.

Should they continue down that path, the new NBER paper suggests a compelling argument to convince dubious suburbanites. “If you have other drivers moving faster and getting out of your way quicker, as well as more people on transit, it just makes sense that your local trip is going to be quicker,” Slevin said.



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**From:** Mike Swire <[mswire91@gmail.com](mailto:mswire91@gmail.com)>  
**Sent:** Tuesday, February 10, 2026 10:46 AM  
**To:** Board (@smcta.com); cacsecretary [@smcta.com]; Mima Crume  
**Subject:** Fwd: Transportation & Climate Blog: Let's be Honest About Highway Expansions

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Dear SMCTA Board, CAC, and CCAG Board,

I highly recommend subscribing to [this blog](#) from the UC Davis Institute of Transportation Studies for the latest research and news on highway policy.

Mike

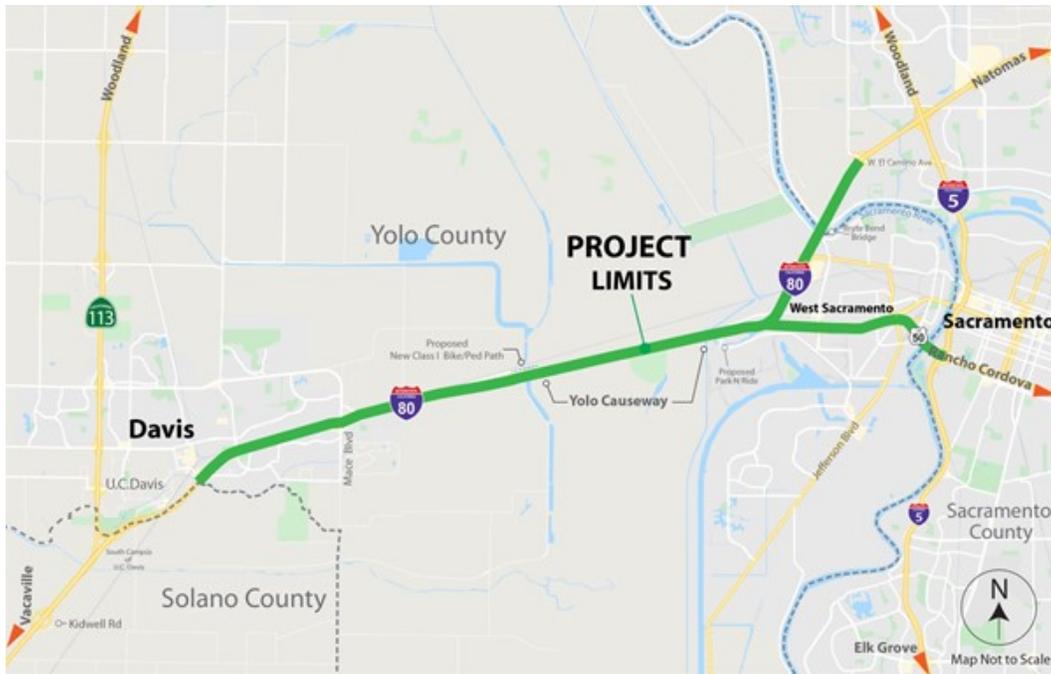
----- Forwarded message -----

**From:** UC Davis Institute of Transportation Studies <[itsdavis@ucdavis.edu](mailto:itsdavis@ucdavis.edu)>  
**Date:** Thu, Jan 29, 2026 at 10:30 AM  
**Subject:** Transportation & Climate Blog: Let's be Honest About Highway Expansions  
**To:** <[mswire91@gmail.com](mailto:mswire91@gmail.com)>



The banner features the ITS UC Davis logo at the top left, with the text "ITS UC DAVIS Institute of Transportation !" in a bold, sans-serif font. Below the logo is a photograph of a yellow taxi driving on a road, with a person in a white shirt and a woman in a blue visor in the foreground. The text "TRANSPORTATION & CLIMATE BLOG" is written in a large, blue, serif font across the middle of the banner. At the bottom, the text "Let's be Honest About Highway Expansions" is written in a bold, orange, sans-serif font, with "By Susan Handy" in a smaller, white, sans-serif font below it.

The [Yolo 80 Corridor Improvements Project](#) between Davis and Sacramento has been underway for months. The current phase of the project involves the construction of modern concrete median barriers along with a widening of the paved shoulders for safety purposes. Assuming legal actions do not interfere, the second phase of the project will use that extra pavement to add a fourth lane in each direction. The new "managed" lanes will, according to official reports, provide an incentive for carpooling or taking the bus, and will reduce travel times for all drivers. Proponents promise that the project will "ease congestion."



Courtesy: Caltrans

The project will undoubtedly ease congestion in the short term, especially in comparison to the nightmare drivers face during construction. But will it ease congestion in the longer term? The answer to that question depends on the degree to which the additional lanes encourage more driving, a phenomenon known as "[induced travel](#)." This phenomenon is explained by simple economic principles: reducing the cost of a desirable good is likely to increase consumption of that good. In this case, the good is driving, and the cost includes the time cost of travel. If it takes less time to drive between Davis and Sacramento, some people (like me) might choose a restaurant in Sacramento rather than Davis, decide to visit the superb Crocker Museum more than once a year, or switch from bus or train to driving when they go. Bay Area residents, who use this route to get to the wonders of Lake Tahoe, might enjoy a few more ski weekends if the Friday afternoon traffic jam in Davis dissipates. Many people will adjust their behavior in small and large ways in response to the freeway improvements.

These behavioral adjustments, as a substantial and rigorous body of research now convincingly shows, lead to an increase in the total amount of driving that, after a period of 5 years or so, is equal in terms of percentage change to the increase in freeway capacity. In economic terms, the "elasticity" of driving with respect to freeway capacity is around 1: a 1 percent increase in capacity is associated with about a 1 percent increase in driving. The net result is that congestion is likely to be just as bad

in 5 years, all else equal as it was before the state spent hundreds of millions of dollars on the widening and drivers endured years of added delays – and greater risks – during construction. The amount of driving is not a direct measure of congestion, which is a function of the ratio between the number of vehicles and roadway capacity at a given time, but more driving generally means more congestion in terms of both worse congestion and longer periods of congestion.

Which isn't to say that a widening project doesn't have benefits: people are driving more because that increase in driving makes them better off in some way. In other words, the true benefit of the project is that it enables more driving, not that it eases congestion. But that increase in driving that benefits individual drivers comes with significant societal costs. For one thing, it adds to the wear and tear on our roadways, which adds to the public cost of maintaining those roadways. For another, it produces what the economists call "negative externalities," that is, costs that my driving imposes on others for which I do not compensate them, namely increases in air pollution, noise pollution, vibrations, crashes, land consumption—and also congestion. More driving means more costs, and these costs offset—in part or in whole—whatever benefits the widening project brings.

So why are we still widening freeways? Especially in California, where the state has adopted targets for reducing driving as a part of its effort to reduce greenhouse gas emissions? The answer is complicated, as documented by Dr. Amy Lee who interviewed more than 50 state, regional, and local officials about this question for her [2023 dissertation](#). The short version of the answer is a combination of strong economic interests, the need to respond to public demands for solutions, and short-sighted decision making, among other factors. In a word: politics.



*Courtesy: Yolo Transportation District*

While California has not (yet) imposed a ban on freeway widenings, it has pushed for better accounting of the induced travel effect in the environmental impact review process under the California Environmental Quality Act. The California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) must [assess the impact of projects](#) that expand highway

capacity on the total amount of driving, measured as vehicle miles traveled (VMT). They must then commit to actions that would “mitigate,” at least in part, the increase in VMT in some way, for example, by improving transit service to encourage a switch from driving. If this all sounds a bit circular—or illogical—that’s because it is: the only way to fully mitigate the VMT induced by the expansion is to not do the expansion. Partial mitigations are complicated, in that the expansion reduces the effectiveness of the mitigation: with less congestion, why would drivers switch to transit? The transit improvement would be more effective without the expansion, but the funding for the improvement may only be available because of the expansion.

The California requirements to estimate induced VMT—also now adopted in Minnesota and Colorado—have focused attention on the tools used to forecast the future performance of the roadway system. These travel demand forecasting models (or TDMs, as they are known) were developed decades ago to be used in a “predict and provide” planning process. The TDM predicted congestion levels twenty or thirty years in the future assuming no expansion of the system, and the state provided additional capacity in those parts of the system where predicted congestion levels were deemed unacceptable. While TDMs have become more sophisticated over time, [experts now recognize](#) that these models do not fully capture the induced travel effect. That recognition has led to the development of [elasticity-based tools](#) that draw on that robust body of evidence mentioned earlier and provide a second way of estimating the increase in VMT that an expansion project will induce.

The availability of competing tools that produce sometimes drastically different estimates has provoked much debate and disagreement. The professional community may never come to a consensus about the best methods for producing the most accurate estimates of induced VMT. What the community does need to agree on is that accurate estimates are important. If our forecasts do not fully capture the induced VMT effect, then our analyses are over-stating the benefits of highway expansion projects in terms of congestion relief, and they are under-stating the negative impacts of those projects in terms of increased emissions, noise, vibration, injuries, fatalities, etc. If these expensive projects are sold as “easing congestion,” the public has right to know how temporary this relief will be. More accurately accounting for induced VMT might not change decisions made about projects, but we have a moral obligation to be as honest as possible with the public about what they are getting for their investment.

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For more information about the methods used by agencies in California to estimate induced travel for highway projects, please see the following reports:

- [Review of the Travel Demand Model Benchmarking Method Used to Estimate Induced VMT for the I-680 Express Lane Project](#)
- [Review of LA Metro’s Proposed Induced VMT Estimation Methods](#)
- [Review of the Rural Induced Demand Study](#)

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**Susan Handy** is a distinguished professor of environmental science and policy at UC Davis and the author of [Shifting Gears: Toward a New Way of Thinking About Transportation](#), published by MIT Press.

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