

Heartburn over congestion pricing suggests another VMT hurdle

By Tanya Snyder

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Lawmakers in charge of reauthorizing transportation programs in the House expressed deep misgivings about congestion pricing on Wednesday, suggesting a new challenge to any attempt to replacing the gasoline tax with a vehicle-miles-traveled fee — already a daunting prospect.

Congestion pricing has been put forward as a way to ameliorate concerns that VMT could unfairly penalize rural residents for living in spread-out areas. But lawmakers' deep divides over congestion pricing on display Wednesday at a House Transportation Committee hearing on the next surface transportation bill suggest agreement may not be easy to achieve.

Democrats, for instance, cited outrageously high prices seen on some highway segments currently managed with congestion pricing, most notoriously a 10-mile stretch on Northern Virginia's I-66 whose toll can reach \$47.

“That’s not even a Lexus lane, that’s a chauffeured limousine lane,” Transportation Chairman Peter DeFazio (D-Ore.) said at the hearing, which focused on pricing and other strategies for combating congestion. “Who can afford that?”

And Rep. Hank Johnson (D-Ga.) mentioned a similar situation on I-85 in Atlanta, where tolls reached \$17 last week.

DeFazio has long supported variable pricing, partly as a way of easing the transition from a gas tax to a vehicle-miles-traveled fee for rural communities. But at Wednesday’s hearing, he stuck with his proposals to index the gas tax to inflation and expand bonding, which he said were “so de minimis it’s just embarrassing that we can’t do it.”

“We’re going to hear some things today [like] congestion pricing,” he said. “Unless you build sufficient options, you can’t just price people off the road.”

Democratic Rep. Tom Malinowski of New Jersey echoed that sentiment, calling out New York’s plan to charge vehicles for entering the heart of Manhattan starting in 2021. “For my folks, hundreds of thousands of people in New Jersey, there are basically three options: You

either drive across a bridge or a tunnel, you take the train, or you swim across the Hudson River.”

New York is the only city in the country poised to implement that kind of cordon pricing, where drivers need to pay to enter a congested zone. In most of the country, congestion pricing takes the form of variable fees on managed highway lanes.

Republicans also had mixed feelings about congestion pricing. Marc Scribner, senior fellow at the Competitive Enterprise Institute, made the case that even highway expansion doesn’t reduce congestion unless it’s paired with congestion pricing. But Rep. Rodney Davis (R-Ill.), ranking member of the subcommittee, seemed eager for witnesses to bring forward other ideas.

Noting that Chicago is considering implementing congestion pricing, Davis said: “That may work in Chicago but I’m really not convinced it’s going to work in the smaller cities I represent.”

Meanwhile, one Democratic witness, Darren Hawkins, appearing on behalf of the American Trucking Associations, came down hard against any increased tolling, saying truckers prefer a fuel tax increase.

At least one witness asked for the next reauthorization to expand pilot programs for pricing schemes, something subcommittee Chairwoman Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton (D-D.C.) said after the hearing she would support.

She noted that “nobody’s prepared” to put a transition to VMT in the next bill, but that they will have to at least set the stage for that transition.

“It will. It must,” she said. “If we don’t at least do that, it will look like we have no new ideas and we’re still doing Eisenhower’s bill.”

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