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Crowded New York-LI will benefit from flex time

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Congestion pricing is being touted as a means for easing the flow of traffic in midtown Manhattan. But charging drivers more to enter the crowded part of the city misses the point.

In the long run price increases generally make little difference in the demand for transportation. We see this with fare increases on trains, subways and buses. Ridership rarely declines as a result. The same is true with bridge and tunnel toll increases.

Congestion pricing will likely steer some would-be drivers to mass transit, and some shoppers or show-goers may simply choose to not come at all. But the overall effect will be minimal. The rise in population since the time when baby boomers came of age has simply created an unabated surge in the number of people who must commute.

At the same time, we are reaching the upper limit of our capacity: on the number of cars that can be on the road, trains that can be on the rails or in the tubes, or planes that can be in the sky. Comfortable and safe distances for all modes of transportation are giving way to major discomfort and, even the potential for disaster.

Simply put, we are starting to run out of space. Even if the extra millions collected from congestion pricing fees are spent on improving and expanding the transportation infrastructure, the pressure of more and more commuters will not go away.

So what's our region to do?

Curtailing crush hour is part of the solution. We could view the work day and, its associated commute, in a new and creative way. Staggered starting times would alter the pattern of demand. Extend the concepts of "peak," "off peak" and "flex-time" by having five generally accepted starting times for our work day - say 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10 a.m., with corresponding times to go home. Both the early birds and night owls among us would rejoice.

With the onset of the Industrial Revolution, many people needed to get to work at about the same and, for the most part, be all in one place with others working the same hours. We are now in a global economy, with firms whose markets and operations are dispersed around the world.

Coverage is needed for serving customers across many time zones, to synchronize globally based sourcing and distribution networks as well as coordinate most managerial functions that are often inherently multinational these days. The communications revolution has made it possible to do business at any time from virtually anywhere. For a while now, working 9 to 5 has been giving way to 24/7, especially in the burgeoning technology and service sectors.

Staggered starting and finishing times, phased in slowly by many firms and organizations, would reduce overcrowding in our transportation networks. This approach would also ease crowding in stores and recreation facilities, since more people could go to these places at different times of day. You can almost hear retailers and their customers breathe a sigh of relief. We would likely spend less time stuck in traffic or transit, too. Most of all, we would have a chance to arrive at work without the commute diminishing our vitality, as it so often regrettably does. Employers would gain employees who are fresher and likely more productive, while almost everyone would end up with a better quality of life.

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