



Auckland Matters

The AA's Auckland infrastructure issues newsletter

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New Zealand Automobile Association



Congestion Charging Part III: Knocking at the door

From the policy team



This issue of Auckland Matters turns the spotlight back on congestion charging. The last time we covered congestion charging (Issue 11 in October 2020) we

lamented the fact that while officials had been investigating it, their findings remained locked in a drawer.

On the one hand, a lot has changed since then. The findings were released a month later and Parliament's Transport and Infrastructure Committee conducted an inquiry into congestion charging in 2021. The Committee's recommendations were unanimous – the government should change the law to allow congestion charging and implement officials' Auckland proposal in full.

On the other hand, nearly five years since it asked officials to look at congestion charging in Auckland, the government is yet to declare its position. Despite sending strong signals it would do so in the recently released Emissions Reduction Plan, the government remains on the fence – but it would seem not for much longer. It has committed to deciding whether to progress legislative changes to enable congestion charging by the end of the year, and if it does decide to progress it, to work with Auckland Council to design a scheme. Given the strong political consensus on congestion charging, it will be a surprise to anyone who has been following the debate if the decision is anything other than a green light.

Tackling congestion has regularly been a top transport priority for our Auckland Members and congestion charging is potentially the most powerful tool for tackling it – so we were keen to hear what they think of the proposal. This issue of Auckland Matters provides an insight into the public perception of congestion charging and sets out what would need to be addressed in legislation.

Martin Glynn
Policy Director

What's on the table?



City centre: congestion charge for driving into and out of the city centre between 6am and 9:30am and 3:30pm and 7pm – possibly from 2025.



Exemptions: Emergency vehicles, buses, motorcycles, scooters and unpowered vehicles.



Motorways and main roads: Progressively rolling out congestion charging to most of the motorways and main arterial roads in Auckland, possibly from 2028.



Possible Discounts: Financially vulnerable households might be eligible for discounts.



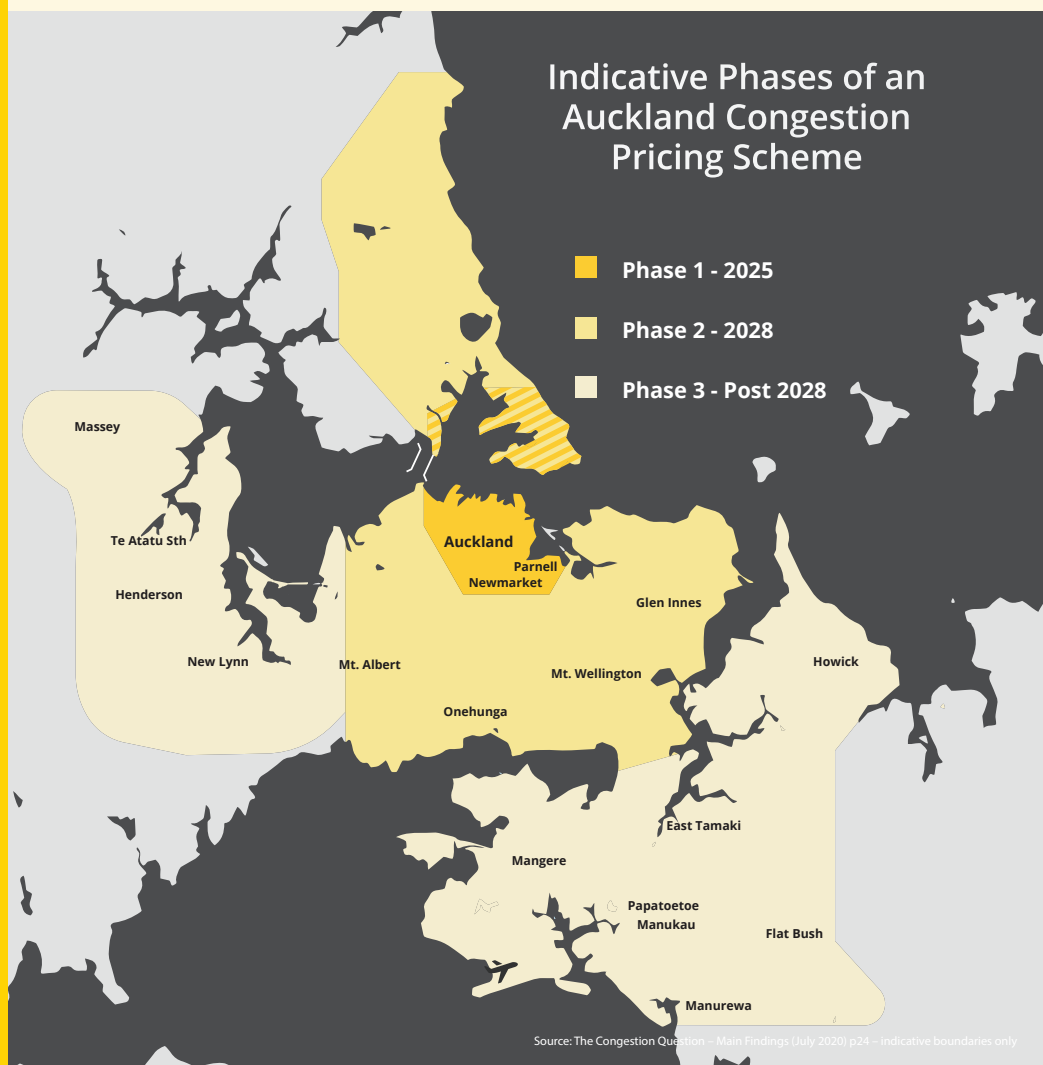
Indicative charges: \$3.50 between 7am-8:30am and 4:30pm-6pm (the busiest parts of the peak periods) and \$1.50-\$2.50 for the remaining parts of the peak periods.



Reduced congestion: An expected 8-12% improvement in network performance at peak times when the full scheme is in place, which officials have described as equivalent to "driving in school holiday conditions".



Daily charge cap: Maximum daily charges capped at \$7 per day regardless of how many trips drivers make at peak times.



Source: The Congestion Question – Main Findings (July 2020) p24 – indicative boundaries only

Key findings

In April we surveyed AA Auckland Members to find out what they think of the proposal and what they would do if it is put in place. We received almost 7,500 responses.

This is what we found:

1 Congestion charging will be a hard sell...

AA Members are extremely sceptical about the idea of congestion charging – just 14% like the idea, compared with 46% who don't. The remaining 40% are split between those who don't know enough about it to express a view (25%) or who didn't indicate a firm view either way (15%).

2 ...particularly for women

Women, and particularly working-aged women, are less likely than men to support congestion charging. Around 8% of women aged between 18-54 indicated they 'like the idea of it', compared with 18% of men in this age group (though the proportions of men and women who 'don't like the idea of it' are similar at 47% and 44% respectively).

More working-aged women than men also indicated that the driving trips they make during peak times are not trips that could be taken at a different time of the day or replaced by another mode of travel.

3 Views firm up when it starts to become a little more real

Opposition increased once it was explained that the proposals were focused on the city centre and the motorways and main roads.

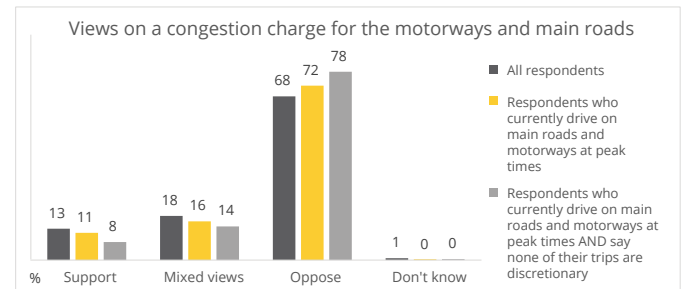
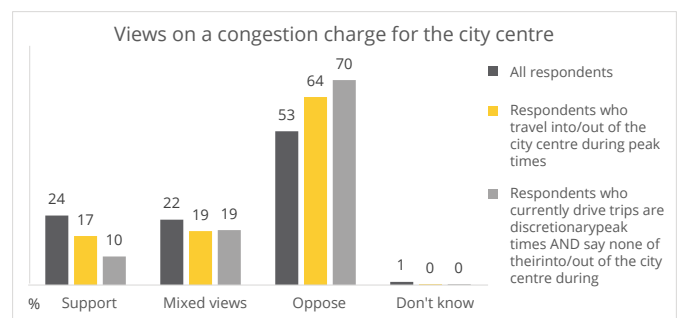
While 46% of respondents indicated they don't like the idea of congestion charging in general, just over half of respondents (53%) are opposed to a congestion charging scheme in the city centre, and over two-thirds (68%) are opposed to congestion charging on the motorways and main roads.

Meanwhile, while 14% of respondents like the idea of congestion charging in general, support increased to 24% for a congestion charge in the city centre but held reasonably steady at 13% for a congestion charge on motorways and main roads.

Opposition to both proposals was also much stronger from those who, based on their current travel patterns would incur the charges, compared with those who wouldn't.

Almost two-thirds (64%) of regular city centre commuters and nearly three-quarters (72%) of motorway/ main road commuters are opposed to the proposals.

And opposition was even higher from those who reported that none of the trips they make at peak times are discretionary – 70% for the city centre and 78% for motorway and main roads.



4 But some trips matter more than others

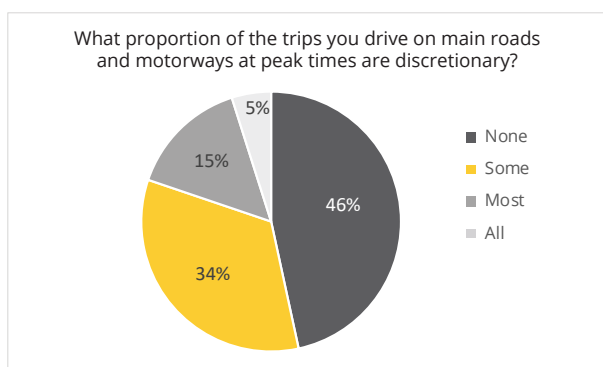
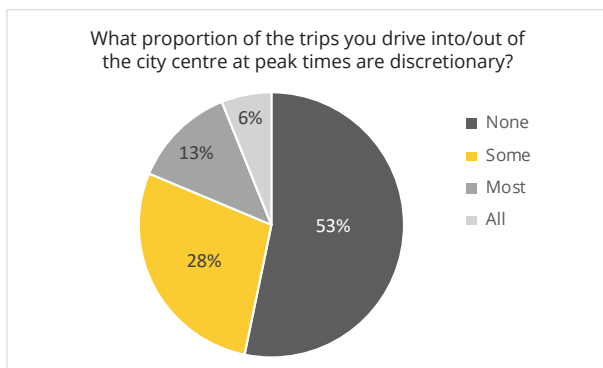
But it's not all doom and gloom for congestion charging. Given the obvious limitations of other modes to replace many of the trips Aucklanders currently need to make by private vehicles at peak times, discretionary trips become crucial.

We asked regular commuters to indicate what proportion of the trips they make at peak times could be avoided or changed in some way. The results surprised us.

Around half (53%) of city centre commuters indicated none of their trips are discretionary. This suggests the remaining (47%) could change the time or mode of at least some of their trips.

The results were similar for motorway and main roads

commuters. Just under half (46%) said 'none' of their trips were discretionary, implying just over half (54%) have at least some scope to change the time or mode of at least some of their trips.



To the extent these results may be indicative of Aucklanders at large, this suggests a potential goldilocks zone for a congestion charge – it would need to be set low enough so that people who still have to drive aren't priced off the network but high enough to encourage people not making essential trips to consider other options.

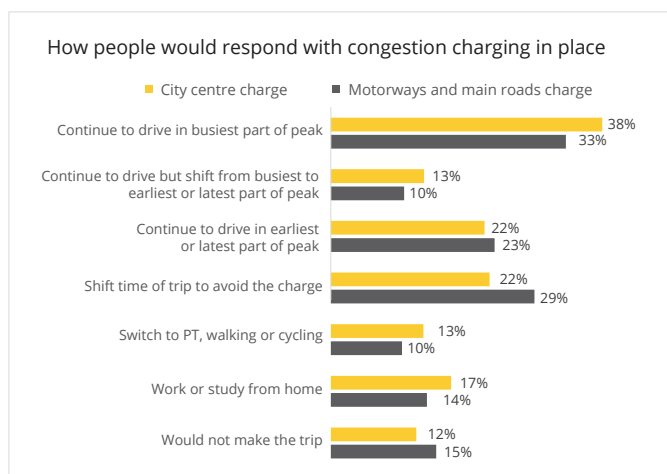
5 Most would still drive in the peak but many would change it up

We asked respondents who regularly travel into/out of the city centre and/or on motorways or main roads at peak times what they would do if congestion charging was in place. They were presented with seven options ranging from continuing to drive in the busiest part of the peak period and pay the highest charge to not making the trip.

The results were broadly similar for trips to and from the city centre and on the motorways and main roads, though it appears motorways and main road commuters may have slightly more scope to change the time of their trips to avoid the charge.

Taken together, these results indicate that the majority would continue to drive at peak times – though some would shift their trips to the earliest or latest part of the peak to avoid the highest charge. However, a significant proportion

are likely to respond in a variety of ways for different trips rather than adopt one single response.



At face value, the results suggest many respondents consider they have options to at least avoid the highest congestion charges. An important exception to this is people who responded they wouldn't make the trip. While some of these "cancelled" trips would have been discretionary, others may have been meeting important needs such as work or education commitments. Identifying how the transport needs of people who fall into this category can be met must be a key factor in any decision to implement congestion charging.

Implications for Auckland

These results provide some indication of wider Auckland sentiment, but some caution is needed in interpreting the results in this way. We received a lower proportion of responses from people aged 18-34 compared with Auckland's population and a much higher proportion of responses from males aged 55-64 than for other age bands.

The responses we got found that 18-54-year-olds were most likely to report they regularly drive at peak times. The figures for the motorway network and main roads were particularly high – 80% of male and 74% of female respondents aged between 18 and 54 regularly drive these roads at peak times.

This suggests the proportion of our responses from regular commuters is less than their share of Auckland's population. When considered alongside our survey finding that regular commuters are more opposed to the proposal, it also suggests that our results are likely to understate opposition, and overstate the extent of discretionary trips, as well as people's ability to retime their trips to pay a lower charge or avoid it altogether, or to switch modes.

Recommendations

With a commitment to congestion charging from the government seemingly imminent, the first step will be to change the law to allow for it. Here are our recommendations for what needs to be in the legislation:

1 What are we trying to do?

Followers of Auckland's congestion charging debate could be forgiven for thinking it could be a "cure-all" for many of the city's biggest transport challenges. It's been promoted to free-up the roads, drive mode shift, reduce emissions, replace Regional Fuel Tax, and to get cars out of the city centre.

Where congestion charging has been implemented, it's mainly been about improving city centre environments through mode shift. The Auckland city centre proposal presumably has similar aims because it's not expected to noticeably improve travel time or reduce city-wide emissions¹ (without extending congestion charging to other parts of the city).

Congestion charging can contribute to multiple goals but there are also trade-offs between them. To have the best chance of success, congestion charging must first and foremost be about what it says.

Legislation will need to clearly set out the purpose and objectives of congestion charging and how proposals will need to demonstrate alignment with both.

2 It's all about the customer

The final decision to switch on congestion charging is unlikely to come down to a popular vote but decision makers will clearly need to see a much higher degree of support – or at least acceptance – than our survey results indicate.

Achieving the necessary social licence for change will require a comprehensive public engagement process that transparently lays out how it will affect people, as well as the overall benefits and costs. And if the process is to be genuine, decision makers and officials will need to be open-minded about making changes in response to public feedback.

The legislation should mirror the current law for tolling new roads which requires the responsible Minister to be satisfied with the level of community support for any tolling proposal.

3 No one left behind

Many of the lowest income Aucklanders need to travel to workplaces that are poorly served by PT, and over distances, which make walking and cycling impractical. In short, what might be fine in Singapore, London or Stockholm just won't fly in Tāmaki Makaurau. Congestion charges cannot become a barrier to people's ability to getting to work or education.

Making the case for congestion charging, particularly beyond the city centre, will therefore depend on demonstrating that people will still be able to meet their travel needs – even where there are no practical alternatives to driving.

The legislation will need to specify how the financial and

wider social impacts of congestion charging proposals must be assessed and addressed to ensure all people can meet their travel needs.

4 Spending on the right stuff

Congestion charging revenue should in the first instance be used to fund alternatives to paying the charge. It is also likely that some revenue would need to be spent on minor road improvements to address displaced congestion. (Before implementing congestion charging, London invested in road widening around the charging zone to ensure the scheme would be successful).

Assumptions about congestion charging providing a new funding stream for other transport priorities need to be set aside until a reliable revenue estimate has been developed and the improvements needed to make congestion charging work have been identified and costed.

The legislation will need to set out that the first call on revenue will be improving the benefits and reducing the costs of any proposed scheme for the public.

5 Flexibility to change if it doesn't work

Congestion charging has only been introduced in a handful of, mainly high density cities, with comprehensive PT systems to match. There are no congestion charging precedents for Auckland to learn from similar North American or Australian cities where growth has also been driven by the mobility provided by cars. It is most definitely a case of uncharted waters.

Designing something that will enable all Aucklanders to meet their transport needs is a big ask when practical alternatives aren't yet there for a large number of people. While rigorous transport modelling, robust scheme design and comprehensive consultation will help, we won't really know for sure how congestion charging will work until someone switches the cameras on.

The legislation will need to specify monitoring and public reporting requirements and the triggers for identifying if changes need to be made.

¹The transport assessment for city centre proposal estimates it would result in a 0.8% reduction in average vehicle travel time across the network, a 4.2% reduction in "total travel time delay" and a 2.5% reduction in time spent in severe congestion. We do not think these changes are likely to be noticeable for most motorists. It also estimates a 0.1% reduction in CO₂ emissions. Source: The Congestion Question: Main Findings, (July 2020), p15

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