

Cities open up to congestion charging

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Traffic jams aren't the only things that disappear when congestion charging programs are implemented. A Swedish researcher finds that opposition to these proposals appears to vanish once they take effect.

Congestion zone charging is a proven technique for reducing traffic in crowded cities, but such proposals frequently meet with stiff public resistance. Recent studies at KTH Stockholm's Royal Institute of Technology show however that once the systems are introduced, attitudes shift sharply.

In Sweden's capital, Stockholm, only 30 percent of the public were in favour of the idea prior to the implementation of a congestion zone charging scheme back in 2006. But Maria Börjesson, Associate Professor in Transport Systems Analysis at KTH, has been tracking opinions and attitudes about congestion charging, and she finds that they aren't always what they seem.

"In general, these systems that start out to be very controversial in most cities have actually turned out to be great successes," Börjesson says.

"Now that congestion charging is implemented in Stockholm, 70 percent of people either like it or they have no problem with," Börjesson. And it appears the same trend could be happening in Gothenburg, where congestion charging was introduced just a year ago.

So what happened to all of the opposition? "We used to think that the change in attitude in Stockholm was because of the reduced congestion,

but now it seems that's only part of the story," she says.

"It seems that it is just a matter of people opposing new things; but once it's there, they accept it. And it's not connected to any of the arguments for or against. It's just a change of opinion that can't be explained in any of the research we tried."

Börjesson says the arguments against congestion charging in Stockholm and Gothenburg were chiefly anti-tax in nature, including complaints about the unfairness of a flat fee for low-income motorists. The supporting arguments in Stockholm focused mainly on the environmental impact.

But while anti-tax arguments concerns all but disappear once congestion charging takes effect, the environmental arguments appear to increase the chances that the system will gain public acceptance.

"The fairness or equity argument is not really an argument, it's just something people say – and it has a lot of traction at first," she says.

"When you explore the attitudes behind it, you find it is something they don't really care about, and that is similar across cities. The people who use these arguments are not really the people who are worried about low income people. They are opposing taxation and the cost of driving."

But the environmental marketing campaigns behind congestion charging proposals have a different affect. Börjesson says that there is a "feedback loop" between attitudes towards the charges and the perception of their effects. "Positive attitudes to the charges increase the belief that the charges have had beneficial effects, and vice versa," she says.

With only a year of congestion charging in place, Gothenburg still has a way to go before a majority accept the system. Börjesson says opinion is

still divided 50/50 in Sweden's second largest city. One likely reason is that the [traffic congestion](#) in Gothenburg is not as serious as in other cities, she says.

But the popularity of congestion charging in Gothenburg also has been hobbled by a marketing campaign that stresses the program's effectiveness as a revenue stream. "That is a misguided marketing message," Börjesson says.

On the other hand, the public wants to be assured that the money from such programs is used fairly and wisely, she says.

"It is the most effective solution to reducing traffic [congestion](#), but still very few cities have it," she says. "The determining factors are public opinion and marketing, including who gets the revenue, and how it is spent.

"One of the reasons Stockholm succeeded was the agreement that the money would stay in the region and go toward big projects," she says. "The public wants it to stay in region and go toward infrastructure."

Provided by KTH Royal Institute of Technology

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