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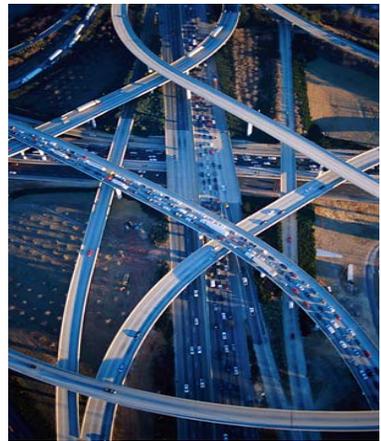
TIME explores the evolving, deep-rooted connections between technology and ever-expanding cities — from education and energy to government, health care, and transportation

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Congestion Pricing: To Skip Traffic, Atlanta Says Pay Up

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By MIKE BILLIPS / ATLANTA Tuesday, Nov. 23, 2010



Spaghetti junction, Atlanta, Georgia
GETTY IMAGES

Tom Preston's commute to work — 42 miles from Cumming, Georgia to downtown Atlanta — takes him along one of the worst rush-hour traffic corridors in the United States. Yet, on most days he cruises past four lanes of traffic. "It's just stopped," he says. "I'm going 40, 45 mph and they're going five miles an hour and stopping every few feet."

More Atlantans may be soon be able to cut their commutes as well — for a price. This summer the Georgia Department of Transportation will complete the construction of a so-called high-occupancy toll lane. It will run 16 miles just north of the city along Atlanta's heavily trafficked I-85, and allow drivers to pay to avoid traffic. The "Express Lane" will cost anywhere from

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10 cents to one dollar a mile depending on the traffic volume on the rest of the highway. The worse the congestion on the freeways, the more drivers will pay to use the fast lane. **(See pictures of how cities are powered.)**

The immediate effect will be to give commuters in a hurry an out. In theory, the higher toll rates will keep a lid on the number of cars in the lane, allowing faster speeds at rush hour. In the long run, the pay lane is expected to create a source of revenue to pay for other measures of congestion relief, like building new roads and adding public transportation so commuters can stay off the road in the first place.

Even more importantly, the toll road will serve as another experiment in how to fight traffic in one of the most congested cities in the nation. "We're offering people a choice," said Malika Wilkins, a spokeswoman for the Georgia State Road and Tollway Authority. "This is about making it to your son's soccer game." Atlanta isn't alone. Seven other cities, including Miami and San Diego, are already experimenting with pay lanes, and three more cities are working on rolling out similar projects while Atlanta may create additional routes.

Traffic isn't just a nuisance; it boosts pollution, never a good thing, and can make cities less competitive. A Texas A&M study last year reported that traffic congestion costs the U.S. \$87 billion a year in wasted time and fuel. Long commute times make it more difficult for companies to recruit candidates from other cities — or just from the other

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side of town. American cities originally used sprawl to combat congestion, dispersing the city center around a larger metro area. But that's only made matters worse. And with so many two-income families, and a stalled real estate market, moving to be closer to your job isn't an option.

(See why Bangkok is the capital of gridlock.)

That's why more and more cities are trying to devise ways to reduce commute times. Dense urban areas such as London, England have used congestion pricing to limit noise and pollution in the city center. Toll lanes are another form of congestion pricing, but more as an enabler of auto transport than to discourage it, and in line with the less dense, more car-dependent lifestyle of most American cities, particularly in the West and Sun Belt.

Few cities need a traffic makeover more than Atlanta. Atlanta proper contains only 10% of metro area's five million residents. The rest live in car-friendly suburbs, miles away from the city's limited public transit network. There are no commuter trains, no streetcars, and the main bus and subway system barely extends beyond the I-285 Perimeter. The result: A sprawling city with the 15th-longest average commute time in the U.S., and the third-most time spent sitting in stalled traffic, according to a recent Rockefeller Foundation study. If the downtown is to hold at all, some way has to be found to allow commuters to make it to jobs in the center of the city, rather than to suburban, edge-city office parks. State officials long had a neutral policy on sprawl and traffic, but federal officials beginning in the 1990s began forcing the state to enact measures that would clean up the Atlanta region's air, or lose federal road funds. That combined with an urban desire for easier commutes led to the creation of high-occupancy-vehicle lanes.

But the HOV lanes, which are open to buses, cars with more than one passenger, motorcycles and some high-mileage vehicles, are expected to grind to a halt as traffic grows. So next summer, Atlanta plans to convert its HOV lanes into pay lanes. Cars carrying three people, upped from two, will still be allowed to ride for free. While such lanes have worked well from San Diego to Minneapolis, critics worry that too many wealthier drivers will be willing to pay up and will clog the road for carpoolers and buses. In Virginia, county officials are fighting the state's plan to convert HOV lanes that run from Northern Virginia to Washington, D.C., claiming pay lanes violate the civil rights of impoverished and minority residents along the route. Arlington County, Va. has sued. Other counties say the HOV lanes work as is, even prompting strangers to carpool. But traffic experts say the idea that pay lanes only benefit the rich isn't true. Timothy Lomax, a research engineer at Texas A&M's Mobility Analysis Program, says studies show that many pay lane users are trying to get to a second job, or make an extra service call. "That's economic choice and it's a huge benefit not just for the rich," says Lomax.

In Atlanta, commuter Tom Preston, who is able to use the HOV lane on most days because he drives a motorcycle or commutes with his wife, says he is worried about losing the hour he saves during his round-trip commute. He says conversion will be too popular, leading to more cars and more crashes. "Once people taste that forbidden fruit of being in the HOV lane, they'll be willing to pay \$20 a day to use it," he says.

Tax-averse governments, though, are eager for any kind of income. And no one disputes that traffic is becoming a bigger and bigger problem. In all, a recent study of traffic and revenue predicted Atlanta's new toll lanes could bring in as much as \$7 million in revenue in the first 12 months, and many times that in future years. If Atlanta's project succeeds expect to see more pay lanes around the country.

(See pictures of Beijing cleaning up.)



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