

I'm Walkin' Here! A Report Card on Congestion Pricing

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Ariana Brocious: I'm Ariana Brocious.

Kousha Navidar: I'm Kousha Navidar.

Ariana Brocious: And this is Climate One.

[music change]

Kousha Navidar: Ah, the sweet sounds of morning in Manhattan. Cars honking, buses screeching, people... also screeching.

Ariana Brocious: (laugh) So calming.

Kousha Navidar: But you know what? That's changed a little, at least in one of the most offending parts of the city. Since January, drivers who come into the city's busiest area during peak hours have to pay a toll - a policy called congestion pricing.

Ariana Brocious: Yeah, this is a big deal! It's been talked about for years and faced numerous hurdles before actually being put into action. Kousha, you're a New Yorker - did you think this was necessary?

Kousha Navidar: For. Sure.. Driving through lower Manhattan can be harrowing. And riding through it can be worse. And I bike through that area, and it is one of the scariest biking experiences I've had before congestion pricing.

Ariana Brocious: Amazing. So, in addition to reducing traffic, this policy has climate benefits -

more people taking public transit is a lot better than a lot of gas cars idling on busy streets. But not everyone loves it – it was unpopular when it was first proposed, right?

Kousha Navidar: Right. That sentiment seems to be changing as it's taken effect, but certainly not everybody likes it or benefits from it. People who have no other option but to drive do have to pay more. Today we're going to explore how the policy's been working so far, what its future might be, and why you should care even if you're not from or in New York.

Ariana Brocious: First up, my conversation with Eric Goldstein, a Senior Attorney and New York City Environment Director at the Natural Resources Defense Council. He gave an overview of what congestion pricing is.

Eric A. Goldstein: Congestion pricing is a transportation management strategy that uses economic incentives and disincentives like variable motor vehicle tolls to break up traffic congestion on crowded roadways. And in the case of New York City, we're talking about the Manhattan Central Business District. The idea is to cut congestion, lower travel times, reduce air pollution, speed delivery, trucks and buses and emergency vehicles, and funnel the collected funds into rehabilitating public transit, which is how most people in New York City commute in the first place.

Ariana Brocious: So places outside the US like London, Stockholm, and Singapore, have already implemented congestion pricing well before New York City tried it. How successful has it been in those places?

Eric A. Goldstein: Well, it's been successful in all of those international places. Starting with Singapore in the late 1990s and then onto London, Stockholm. In Milan, they found reductions in traffic volumes, decrease in traffic delays, cutbacks in air pollution, like particulate matter and ozone smog and increased bus ridership. And, overall, it's been a success. And, what they found in a number of these cities is that public opinion switched. Initially there was a lot of opposition and then as city residents began to see the benefits of congestion pricing in those jurisdictions, they became more supportive of the program.

Ariana Brocious: Hmm, that's interesting. So. Help us understand what this part of Manhattan is like for people who don't live there or maybe haven't even visited. Can you paint a picture for us of where congestion pricing is currently in effect in Manhattan?

Eric A. Goldstein: Well, Manhattan is an island and the lower half of the island is the central business district. This is the nation's largest and most densely populated business area. It's everything in Manhattan, south of 60th street. And on a typical day before congestion pricing, you would see choking traffic, bottlenecks. Stop and go travel. Travel time on the cross streets was as low as four miles an hour. In other words, you can almost jog more quickly if you were trying to get across town. And so this had enormous economic costs and environmental costs as well, because, the slower the speed, the more stop and go traffic, the greater pollution. And so with things getting from bad to worse. Back in 2019, the New York State legislature recognized that something had to change and meanwhile, our public transit system was in declining health. And really need an infusion of capital monies. And so this strategy really was designed to attack both sides of the problem, to reduce the congestion that is causing such mobility problems for all the commuters and emergency vehicles and such, and to inject an infusion of funds into the subway, buses and commuter rail system that move almost 90% of the people who go into and come out of the Manhattan Central Business District.

Ariana Brocious: So this policy was talked about for a long time, before it was implemented and it was scrapped by Governor Hochul the first time it was scheduled to be enacted. When did

congestion pricing really switch from an idea to a reality?

Eric A. Goldstein: Well, in one way or another, the program has been around in New York City, going back to the 1970s. Originally, the idea came from Columbia University economist who came up with the plan in the 1950s, but the first effort to implement tolls on the bridges and use the funds for transit emerged out of the Clean Air Act planning in the 1970s. It was then resurfaced, when then Mayor Bloomberg was in office about 15 years or so ago, but finally in 2019, after what was called the Summer of Hell, when the subways really, were showing their age and deteriorating, when government recognized that something needed to be done. So often, it takes a crisis to jumpstart a new program in, city government or state government. And that was the case with the declining public transit service and increasing congestion in New York City.

Ariana Brocious: So what's interesting to me in part about this is that you have a mechanism that is charging users of the roads for improvements, when you could arguably find that money elsewhere, perhaps. So is it necessary to not simply invest in public transit alone, but to actually disincentivize driving into this part of the city.

Eric A. Goldstein: Well, the benefits to public transit is only one of the benefits of this program. The primary objective is to reduce the traffic congestion that extracts enormous economic and environmental costs on everyone throughout the region. One study by the partnership, which is the city's leading business group, found that the costs to businesses because of all the choking congestion and delays was \$10 billion a year, and so there's a cost when deliveries can't get there on time or when you can only make two or three truck stops an hour as opposed to five or six because you're crawling along in stop and go traffic. There's a cost to businesses when it takes so long for people to get to an appointment if they're driving. There's a cost to business if there are workers that don't have predictable travel times, because they're often stuck in, just bollocks up traffic congestion and so there's an economic cost: emergency vehicles, fire police, ambulances, just are slowed down. And there's a health cost to that too. And on top of that, the environmental cost of pollution. When you have stop and go traffic, and more vehicle miles traveled, you've got all kinds of air pollutants coming out of your trucks, cars, and buses, and of course burning gasoline and diesel also emits carbon dioxide, which is the number one global warming gas. So for all of those economic and environmental reasons, it makes sense to grapple with the congestion problem and try to cut it down even if you weren't using the funds to support public transit, which is the more sustainable alternative way to get into a congested area like the City of New York and the Manhattan Central Business District.

Ariana Brocious: What were the most persistent myths that circulated before this policy went into effect?

Eric A. Goldstein: Well, there were three. One was that this program would hurt working class and lower income New Yorkers, and that has been soundly disproven by a variety of studies. One study from the Community Service Society, which is our oldest and most respected anti-poverty group, found that only 2% of the working poor would end up paying this toll because they are the ones who use transit and the funds from congestion pricing will upgrade and make that transit system more reliable. So that's one myth. A second myth has been that congestion pricing is bad for business. But as I mentioned just before, congestion costs money for businesses. \$10 billion a year according to a major study by the partnership are number one business organization in New York. Then the third myth of those who oppose congestion pricing has been that congestion pricing won't help drivers. And this is one of the surprising things, is that there's been considerable support among drivers. Before this, all they could think about was the fact that they would have to pay a toll to get into the Manhattan Central Business District. Now they realize they're saving time, they're getting to their offices on a quicker schedule and more predictable.

In some cases, commuters are saving as much as 20 or 30 minutes off a commutation from New Jersey or Staten Island into the Manhattan Central Business District. So it helps drivers as well because it removes a lot of the traffic that would otherwise be delaying them.

Ariana Brocious: Yeah. There were some political impediments to getting this in place. There were also some legal threats that had to be resolved. Can you just summarize quickly what those were?

Eric A. Goldstein: One set of concerns came from New Jersey and from folks outside of Manhattan, who raised some challenges about the adequacy of the environmental review process. In fact, this was an extensive environmental review that took place between the federal government and the state government over as much as five years. There were 4,000 pages of analysis and the conclusion of these environmental reviews was that overall this would be a significant environmental plus, and that to the extent that there were environmental burdens that this strategy would impose, say, on communities outside of the Manhattan Central Business District. There were ways of mitigating those problems. And so as a result of those environmental analyses, the MTA, our Regional Transit Authority, has pledged \$155 million in mitigation funds to go to communities in the South Bronx to reduce pollution there. As a sort of compensation for the fact that there might be slightly increased levels of air pollution as drivers seek to skirt around the Manhattan Central Business District and avoid those tolls. A second set of challenges, has been raised by the Federal Department of Transportation. Even though the US Department of Transportation approved the entire congestion pricing program back in November of 2024. Under the Trump administration, they have sought to reverse course.

Ariana Brocious: Right. We've been hearing about this in the news.

Eric A. Goldstein: Yes, yes indeed. But federal agencies have made a formal decision. And signed an agreement to advance this program can't simply change their minds and courts set a very high bar when agencies seek to make 180 degree turnabout, a simple change in administrations is not legally sufficient on the whole to justify a change in policy.

Ariana Brocious: Why does the Trump administration want to end the program? What rationale have they given?

Eric A. Goldstein: They have asserted that this would be a burden on working class residents and commuters and they have suggested that somehow the program is unfair. Again, if you look at the facts and look at the experience that New Yorkers and residents throughout the tri-state region have been experiencing since congestion pricing has started, most of these myths have not come to pass. And, again, the program is working on a whole host of different levels.

Ariana Brocious: Yeah, so perhaps a political agenda there, which would be in line with a lot of other decisions the Trump administration is making. Have there been any pain points or negative outcomes that were anticipated or unanticipated? I mean, you mentioned certain parts of the city, maybe the South Bronx getting a little bit more pollution. What have been any of the downsides?

Eric A. Goldstein: People hate change, and it takes time to adjust. When laws requiring seat belts to be installed on automobiles first came into place, where laws requiring no smoking in restaurants and bars took effect, there were a lot of objections at the beginning. Over time, people adjusted. Folks realized that this is broadly beneficial. We think that that's most likely going to be the outcome here. And so, there's every reason to believe that over time this will become second nature throughout the New York region and hopefully be adopted in other cities that are facing congestion problems of their own.

Ariana Brocious: Right. So that's actually where I want to go next, because I think there are a number of cities in the US that, that have this issue, though maybe not to the degree of, of Manhattan, but lots of big cities, lots of congestion, lots of busy downtowns that could probably implement a version of this. I live in a very spread out city that doesn't have a particularly big or super congested downtown except for certain times of day, you know, regular work traffic. But I'm curious if there are ideas related to congestion pricing that you think would work for cities like mine that are not so much in the model of a Manhattan or a San Francisco.

Eric A. Goldstein: Well, one of the beauties of the congestion pricing concept is that it's flexible and there are ways in which it could be adjusted for cities and localities based upon the individual characteristics there. The idea is really easy. You use economic incentives and disincentives to shift transportation and travel modes when you've got a problem. And so if you have a particular city that has a problem only at certain times of the day, you could have a time sensitive fee that would perhaps only apply during those rush hour periods and at other times, not have a charge. Or if you've got a city like Los Angeles that knows it's gonna have particularly severe congestion problems when the Olympics comes there, you could have a temporary congestion surcharge just during that several week period. The flexibility of this system, particularly these days with the technology of electronic license plate reading, means there's a lot of flexibility that can be applied and so that different jurisdictions can design the system in a way that addresses their problems and maximizes the benefits.

Ariana Brocious: It seems like though it does take political will in any of these places, you have to have enough buy-in, to get this policy passed. Would you agree?

Eric A. Goldstein: Absolutely. The politics is often the hardest part of this. The transportation planners and the engineers are very capable these days of figuring out how to design these systems to work efficiently and we now have models of how it's being done in places around the world as we've seen in London, Stockholm, Milan, and Singapore. But now, what we need to do is have the political will to make a change that obviously affects a very wide group of travelers, and that's going to take some political courage.

Ariana Brocious: Eric Goldstein is a senior attorney at the Natural Resources Defense Council. Eric, thank you for joining us on Climate One.

Eric A. Goldstein: A pleasure. Thanks for having me.

Kousha Navidar: Coming up, one expert's report card on congestion pricing:

Sarah M. Kaufman: It is safer to walk around the streets, to bike, and it is safer for drivers as well. There are fewer vehicles. There's less road rage and even less honking.

Kousha Navidar: Plus, we tag along with a New Yorker who commutes in and out of the city using almost every mode of public transportation. That's up next, when Climate One continues.

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This is Climate One. I'm Ariana Brocious.

Kousha Navidar: And I'm Kousha Navidar. So broadly speaking, I think New Yorkers are appreciating the impacts of congestion pricing... even if not all of them love having to pay the tolls.

Ariana Brocious: Yeah, say more about that. What's the sense you get from your friends who live in

that part of the city?

Kousha Navidar: Well, you know the old saying, “show, don’t tell.” So I hit up an old buddy of mine who regularly commutes in and out of the city. I asked if I could tag along to get a sense of how the policy has changed his routine. He was game.

Jared Blau: Hey, what's up man? I brought you a Perrier. Oh, Perrier, wow. First class. How are you? Nice to see you. Let me ride along.

Kousha Navidar: I met my old friend jared at a metro north train station in Tarrytown, New York, as he was coming back into Manhattan at the end of his workday.

Kousha: How was your day today?

Jared Blau: It was good. We did four surgeries and I felt really good about them.

Kousha Navidar: Jared is a surgeon who lives in Manhattan but travels in and out of the city two to three times a week to work at an office in Middletown. To get back home, JaredJared Blau drives, takes a suburban train, two subways, and finally walks. The whole thing takes about two hours.

Kousha Navidar: Is it exhausting?

Jared Blau: It's, it's a big commute. Yeah. I don't love driving. So. It's not that exciting for me to do it.

Kousha Navidar: So where are we right now?

Jared Blau: This is the North White Plains parking garage. And that's the train station. So this is where I park and this is where my car is, you know, maybe five days a week, whether I'm there or not.

Kousha Navidar: Jared has considered alternatives to this commute, but this is what works best for him.

Uh, let's look. So we're taking the 7 23. Which will come on track two. So now we go this way.

Jared Blau: Well, I like my job. I like what I, you know, get to do. I'm not ready to move to a small town like Middletown. I'm happy to work there, but I live in Manhattan. The only alternative I could think of would be, you know, driving.

I just don't wanna drive in the city. Philosophically, I don't think people should drive into the city.

Kousha Navidar: Plus, he loves New York transit. I mean, like, really loves it.

Jared Blau: We have an amazing city with so much public transit, whether it's a subway or, or this like the suburban commuter railroad.

I just wish there were a suburban commuter railroad that took me all the way up to Middletown. That would be my dream.

Kousha Navidar: New Yorkers know that each mode of transportation has its own vibe. the subway can be loud. But Metro North is way quieter.

Jared Blau: No one really talks on the train. The fact that I'm talking now is probably bugging some

people.

Kousha Navidar: Has congestion pricing changed your commute at all?

Jared Blau: When congestion pricing first was launched it was definitely a lot more crowded on the morning commute trains, the ones into the city. It's still crowded, but not as crowded as it once was.

Kousha Navidar: Do you feel like congestion pricing has changed your life in the city and any other way besides being a commuter?

Jared Blau: So much. Yeah. At least when it first started, it worked. Meaning there wasn't traffic on 42nd Street or, you know, it was actually pretty doable. I knew that there were a fewer cars on the road. I saw it. it's crept back up now. Uh, but yeah, there was a major difference. It just felt quieter. I felt like I was less likely to get hit by a car.

I believe so much in the people get together as the government and can nudge other people in the direction that we agree on, right? So if the people have decided that they want fewer cars on the road and they put up a congestion pricing thing, that's a nudge. So some people will still pay it, some people will choose not to.

I also felt, you know, less traffic's good for everyone. You've probably seen ambulances stuck in traffic. Right? How nice is it to imagine that an ambulance won't have to fight with as many cars, it can get to one of your loved ones faster.

Yeah, in general, I think people need to just take public, especially as they, like in New York, the public transit is so good. You know, for \$2.90 cents you get anywhere on a bus or train or even the gondola like cable car to Roosevelt Island. Yeah, it's true. It is nice.

Kousha Navidar: We were getting close to subway transfer. And Jared had some good stories to tell about riding the subway in New York.

Have you ever like had a classic New York moment?

Jared Blau: I don't think you get to be a New Yorker unless you cried on the subway. You know, one time I just ugly cried, right? Sitting on the, I was sitting down and just people, it was classic and New Yorkers like ignored me, which was good. That was good. I just had a private ugly cry in public.

Kousha Navidar: And then the Metro North came to a stop and we stepped off, walking into a busy, gorgeous, gold station that is the quintessential meeting spot in books, movies, and in many people's imaginations when they think of New York: Grand Central Station.

Jared Blau: So we just got off the train at Grand Central. It looks like we are on the upper level, which is nice. It's gonna be an easier egress from the station. And now we're going to get on the subway, probably gonna take the seven to get to Times Square next, you can take the S or the seven.

So now we are descending into the subway. Yeah. Yeah.

Kousha Navidar: Jared starting walking. fast. One second I look down to make sure my mic's ok, and the next I look up and he's making a beeline around a corner.

[Express train, please step aside and let the passengers ask the train.]

Jared Blau: I pulled up my subway app and I saw that this subway was leaving in minutes, so that's why I like ran over here. We don't enough time for me to explain that to you. That's why I just walked quick then I walked through. I walked slowly into the subway thinking that they won't close it around me and you can slip in. Smart. Yeah, smart. I was willing to like be a human shield for you.

Kousha Navidar: And some people say New Yorkers aren't nice.

We transfer to one more train, get off near Rockefeller Center, and walk the last few blocks to Jared's place.

Jared Blau: We are now at my apartment.

Kousha Navidar: What's the first thing you do when you get home after that commute?

Jared Blau: Oh, charge my phone. 'cause I, I don't have, you know, like my phone is so dry after this, uh, two hour commute situation.

It was a really fun two hours. Thanks, Jared.

Kousha Navidar: It's a long trek, even only a couple times a week. But while we were riding on metro north, Jared made a good point about one of the hidden benefits of this kind of travel. Not about traffic, not even about the climate — just about sitting with yourself.

Jared Blau: I mean, I can't make the train go any faster, so it's not like when you're walking you can sidestep people or walk fast, you know, we're all on this train together. So yeah, this is just sort of like, uh, an agreed upon 44 minutes on the train, you know, whatever you wanna get done that time you can, you know, you can make happen. You know, everything else in my life, I try to do two things at once or make things go faster, I always try to eat fast so I can go on to the next thing. And, uh, yeah. Here on the train you are just, you know, you're traveling at the same speed as everyone else.

Kousha Navidar: Shout out to my friend Jared Blau for letting me ride along on his journey into the city. So he said after congestion pricing, that trip feels a little quieter and feels a little safer.

To be fair, his is a reverse commute, so his experience may not be representative. And yet he's not alone in his observations. I chatted with an expert who's keeping track of the data on congestion pricing. Sarah Kaufman is an assistant professor and director of NYU's Rudin Center for Transportation Policy and Management. I asked her what kind of grade she'd give the policy so far.

Sarah M. Kaufman: I would give congestion pricing an A or an A minus perhaps. The program's working as intended. It's reducing traffic, it's raising funds for public transit improvements. Its success across the board in terms of safety, traffic reduction, improving the livability in Manhattan, increasing productivity of people who are trying to get around. The only thing I'm waiting for is to see some pretty, large transit improvements that should come along with that hefty revenue generation.

Kousha Navidar: A or A minus, that's a pretty high grade.

Sarah M. Kaufman: Yes.

Kousha Navidar: I'm wondering, like if I had asked you that question in January is that the grade you would've expected to give?

Sarah M. Kaufman: I wasn't sure what grade I would give it beforehand. I was expecting some

technical issues, which did not happen. I was worried about community outcry, which although there has been opposition, it has gradually dissipated because people have seen the success of the program. So I was expecting a solid B, but in fact, the program is working much better than I even anticipated.

Kousha Navidar: Yeah. What about the negative impacts from the policy? Have there been any downsides so far?

Sarah M. Kaufman: So far the negative impacts are felt by businesses that are perhaps paying more for deliveries or other costs that are incurred and passed down the line to small shops and then passed down to customers. Those are certainly negative impacts. But a lot of New York businesses, according to a New York Times study that was just done, are kind of swallowing the cost as a cost of doing business and are able to proceed.

Kousha Navidar: Are there any other folks living in or around New York City who, who like might not be happy customers with this kind of policy taking impact?

Sarah M. Kaufman: You can't have any policy and have everyone be happy with it.

Kousha Navidar: Absolutely everyone can agree on that.

Sarah M. Kaufman: There is no universal happiness policy.

Kousha Navidar: The puppies policy!

Sarah M. Kaufman: The puppies policy. Sure, of course there are people who are upset with the policy. They feel like it's yet another added cost at a time when Americans' lives are exceedingly expensive. That being said, a lot of people are seeing the benefits in ways that they didn't expect, like having reduced travel time to work. So if they're driving into Manhattan, they may still be upset about paying the fee, however their driving commute is taking half of the time that it did before, so they are seeing benefits or even if they're not directly monetary.

Kousha Navidar: I was reading this recent article from the Gothamist, which for listeners is a publication that focuses on New York City. And it says that congestion pricing has accelerated the decline of car crashes for its specific section of Manhattan where that congestion pricing exists. Is that right? Is it safer on the streets now?

Sarah M. Kaufman: Yes, it is safer to walk around the streets, to bike, and it is safer for drivers as well. There are fewer vehicles. The vehicles are moving in a more organized fashion. In my opinion. There's less road rage. And even another positive externality that many of us didn't even see coming is less honking. So noise complaints within the zone have gone down 70%, which is fantastic. Seven-zero percent.

Kousha Navidar: Wow. When you think about those positive externalities and maybe something unexpected or something that you think is really important, is there data that you're waiting to hear about?

Sarah M. Kaufman: Yes, I'm following the data closely and especially this program just went into effect on January 5th of this year, meaning that we've only had about two seasons worth of this policy, the winter and spring. Summer is when traffic moves more quickly. People are trying to get out of the city on Friday afternoons. It's really a cacophony, but I'm curious to see how the city changes in the summer and in the fall, every year we hit peak traffic, peak ridership on transit. So in September and October. I'm curious to see how everything sorts out, both on the roads and on the

trains, because I think that we will see the true effects of the program during the fall.

Kousha Navidar: This is kind of the, the, the warmup act and we're gonna see the actual, like the main events coming for summer and fall.

Sarah M. Kaufman: Yes, typically peak subway ridership, it hits on a Tuesday in October, so I will be waiting.

Kousha Navidar: Why is it a Tuesday in October? Do you have any sense of that?

Sarah M. Kaufman: I think some people work from home on Mondays and Fridays or there are a lot of Monday holidays. Tuesdays people tend to be in the office and extra productive.

Kousha Navidar: Right. And October is like the start of the last quarter for a lot of businesses, I think. So it might be, this is interesting. I feel like I'm learning how to adapt my own subway ridership activity based on this. You're very helpful. Thank you. So, again, it's pretty early days, but what, what can we gather about the environmental impact from all this?

Sarah M. Kaufman: It is still early, but it's expected that air quality is much improved from the reduced number of cars in the congestion zone. So, that means fewer emissions from vehicles. And even though it was assumed that there would be more traffic, in places like the South Bronx, which have pretty high rates of asthma, and car emissions would exacerbate that effect, at this point that hasn't panned out. Hopefully that will continue and we won't see an increase of emissions, in these zones that are already suffering from high rates of emissions. and there's still a fair amount of wear and tear on the road from vehicles, which has a significant environmental impact. But, overall the climate impact of getting people out of vehicles and onto trains and buses and bikes and walking is just phenomenal.

Kousha Navidar: And an important part of this policy is actually using the funds to now build up those transit options, right?

Sarah M. Kaufman: That's right. We are using a subway system that's over a hundred years old in many parts, and it needs upgrading. And so whenever there are breakdowns as is going to happen in an antiquated system. That's what the funds are going to improve tracks and signals and infrastructure, and then also on the human facing side, putting in elevators and new access points for people to access the system more easily. People who may not be able to do the subway stairs, which can be tedious or preventative for many riders, they can ride the elevator if they use a wheelchair or if they're pushing a stroller or they are pulling luggage, they will now have better access to the subway system.

Kousha Navidar: Have you had to adapt or seen your routine change as a result of congestion pricing?

Sarah M. Kaufman: My situation has improved for the better. I don't own a vehicle. I live outside the zone. I commute into the zone. I take the subway every day. It is more pleasant within the zone. I feel safer walking around. It's quieter., The cars seem to be acting or the drivers seem to be acting, less road ragey than they have been in the past. And I'm considering trying biking because it is a calmer street environment now.

Kousha Navidar: Yeah. What are some of the biggest obstacles in the way of actually seeing this, besides just the political climate? Is there an implementation side of it too, that you think could get in the way?

Sarah M. Kaufman: Some vehicle owners are using things called ghost plates, which are fake license plates, so that when the cameras capture the image of their license plate, they won't be charged. That's a huge problem here in New York, and I've even been served ads on Instagram to get these ghost plates, even though I don't have a car. And I disagree with that theft, essentially. But it is becoming a huge problem here in New York and it's requiring an NYPD crackdown, but it's very difficult to catch these vehicles that have the fake plates on the front.

Kousha Navidar: Wow. the market finds its niche, right? That's, I feel like Adam Smith is like rubbing his invisible hands, like I told you. That's wild. Okay, so I, I know it's hard to say for sure one way or another, but you gave it at the top of this interview, congestion pricing, an A, A minus. That's a big praise. Do you think that correlates to the chances that congestion pricing stays in place?

Sarah M. Kaufman: I think it's very likely that congestion pricing will stay in place. If we imagine that it got removed tomorrow and drivers were invited back to flood the city with vehicles, we'll see all sorts of issues. One thing we didn't even talk about is that school buses have been delayed by the congestion in the city. So little Timmy who's trying to go to school is delayed about a quarter of the time within the zone. But now with congestion pricing, it's a much smaller amount, like 10% of the time, which is pretty unavoidable, honestly. So there are all these sorts of impacts that I think that New Yorkers will stand up and say, we don't want this anymore. It's time to get this program back in place.

Kousha Navidar: I'm so happy you brought that up. 'cause I'm, that made me think of, ambulances too, because any New Yorker has seen the ambulance that's with its sirens blaring and it's just like stuck in traffic. Is anyone recording those response times or is that part of the calculus too.

Sarah M. Kaufman: Yes, I have colleagues at NYU at the Tandon School of Engineering who are studying ambulance and fire response times. And at this point, before congestion pricing, these emergency vehicles were just sitting in traffic. And now, with congestion pricing, these vehicles are able to move through traffic much faster than before. It's not perfect, but it is certainly an improvement.

Kousha Navidar: You know, I'm so appreciative to get to talk to somebody who is yourself tracking this data or has colleagues who's tracking this data, because traffic is such a big part of our lives. At the same time, you and I both know New York City gets a bad rap for thinking that it is the center of the world. So on behalf of all the listeners of Climate One, I gotta ask like, why should people outside of New York City care about what happens with its congestion pricing?

Sarah M. Kaufman: Well, I'm not one to say congestion pricing is coming soon to a city near you, but it might be coming in some form to a city near you. If you look at other major cities, Chicago, Boston, Los Angeles, they all face significant gridlock and they're feeling the same effects. Delayed emergency vehicles, slower productivity, kids getting to school late. All of these topics we've talked about are affecting these cities too. And I am willing to bet that these cities are watching New York's experience closely to understand how it's working here, what's working and what isn't, so that they can think through potentially implementing some form or some zone in which they can reduce traffic so that they can experience these positive impacts as well.

Kousha Navidar: Sarah Kaufman is Director of NYU's Rudin Center for Transportation Policy and Management and Assistant Clinical Professor of Public Service at NYU Wagner. Sarah, thanks so much for joining us.

Sarah M. Kaufman: Thank you for having me.

Kousha Navidar: And a quick news note: On May 27, a federal court judge made an important ruling. The judge temporarily blocked the Trump administration's attempt to end New York's congestion pricing by withholding transportation funding. As of now, congestion pricing will remain in place through at least June 9th.

Ariana Brocious: Coming up, how a range of transportation options lets some people live car-free, even in a city built around cars.

Ryan Johnson: The day of everyone having their own private vehicle that's parked 95% of the time is ending.

Ariana Brocious: That's up next, when Climate One continues.

This is Climate One. I'm Ariana Brocious.

Kousha Navidar: And I'm Kousha Navidar.

Ariana Brocious: So congestion pricing seems like it's working as intended, and many New Yorkers are experiencing some of the benefits.

Kousha Navidar: And hopefully even more once that toll money starts to flow into improving public transit.

Ariana Brocious: Yeah, let's hope. But you know, as someone who lives in an extremely car-dependent western city, this policy feels distant from the life I lead. That's why I was so surprised and interested to hear about this car-free neighborhood in Tempe, Arizona, part of the Phoenix metro area, just a couple hours north. It's called Culdesac, and Ryan Johnson is its co-founder and CEO.

Ryan Johnson: Tempe was ideal because of the great land here and the transportation focus. There's a forward thinking government and innovative partnerships with Valley Metro. This is the first market for Waymo and AV ridehail is gonna be the technology that changes our cities more than any other. Also, now Electric is the number one eBike company and is based in Phoenix.

Ariana Brocious: AV is autonomous vehicle ride hail. Were there places you considered before going there that didn't work?

Ryan Johnson: Well, we started the company in San Francisco and we looked all over the country for places that had the right conditions for this, that had the right kind of job growth, great land and forward-looking politicians. And one of the questions we get a lot is, why not California was a no-go and it would work in California. This would work in a lot of places, but if we had picked California, we wouldn't have anything built yet.

Ariana Brocious: And that's why, because of the difficulties in getting permits or what. Exactly.

Ryan Johnson: Exactly.

Ariana Brocious: So, there have been many car-free communities across the world, obviously before the debut of the automobile. And so there are many cases in those places where cities were designed at the outset to not be dependent on cars. Obviously these are much more of our older cities, not our more modern ones. So what makes Culdesac novel in today's world?

Ryan Johnson: The United States forgot how to build walkable neighborhoods, and we've largely

stopped building them. For the last 80 years we've had car-centric policies in car-centric cities, but people want to live in walkable neighborhoods, and it's possible now, because of residents being able to use a portfolio of transportation options instead of a private vehicle. So our residents use Lyft or Waymo, or the light rail or electric bikes, or electric scooters, or hourly car rental. And this portfolio has only existed recently.

Ariana Brocious: And part of the design also is to embed things in the community that people need. Right. So you have a whole retail section. Can you tell me a little bit about what's inside that section?

Ryan Johnson: Yeah. So, in Culdesac there's 22 retailers, and these are some of the things that we can add because we don't have a huge parking lot or structured parking garage. And this is everything from a corner market to a coffee shop, to a bike store, to boutique shops, like a vintage clothing store. And it makes it so that the residents have, there's a lot more culture and there's a thriving retail hub and it also is a place to visit. So we actually have more visitors every day than residents, and that makes the place livelier.

Ariana Brocious: That's interesting. It draws people from the surrounding neighborhoods maybe.

Ryan Johnson: Yeah, there's people from all over the city that come to visit Culdesac because it's a beautiful place to visit and it's a great place to own a store as well because it doesn't look like a strip mall. You have a beautiful background and your customers are excited to visit.

Ariana Brocious: When did you move there?

Ryan Johnson: I moved in as the first resident in May of 2023.

Ariana Brocious: And what's it been like as a resident?

Ryan Johnson: It is great here. So there's a culture of belonging. Living here gives transportation freedom and this thriving retail creates a lot of energy. And watching people move in bit by bit. It's now over 90% full, has been great in watching all the connections that residents make.

Ariana Brocious: So what's been the biggest challenge for these residents who have voluntarily left a car-dependent lifestyle and moved into Culdesac. What have been some of the challenges maybe that they've experienced in doing that?

Ryan Johnson: Well, a lot of behavior shifts can be challenging when you've been doing something for years. It can be hard to change that. but the math just really makes a lot of sense. and, and the freedom makes a lot of sense. So the average American is spending over a thousand dollars a month on their car. Now the average price of a new car is getting close to \$50,000. And you actually can use a lot of transportation services and get a lot more house, when you're not spending so much on a car. So our residents, on average, spend several hundred dollars less on a vehicle. So that means they can, uh, spend that more on other great things in their lives. And so it takes a little bit for people to, to live a new way, and then they love it.

Ariana Brocious: This is a really interesting community, really interesting model and kind of a pilot. How scalable is this approach beyond this particular community. I mean, how could you do more of these within Tempe, within Phoenix, within other cities in the US?

Ryan Johnson: This is the only scalable model. We've been building our cities in an unsustainable way, from a climate perspective, from a happiness perspective, from a health perspective, from a cost of living perspective, and even from a cost of government perspective. Our taxes are higher

because of all the way that we've built our cities. So this is how we have to be building cities, and we're really lucky that this is actually what people want. And in fact, people will pay a premium. The problem is that we just haven't been building these kind of neighborhoods largely because they've been illegal.

Ariana Brocious: Illegal because of the parking requirements, basically.

Ryan Johnson: Yeah, because of zoning, et cetera.

Ariana Brocious: We've talked on the show before about some companies that do very localized air quality monitoring. I don't know if that's anything that you guys are pursuing, but what are some of the ways you've been able to measure the climate benefits of Culdesac?

Ryan Johnson: Well, we had some Harvard researchers here and they did a temperature comparison and we were more than 15 degrees cooler than the apartment complex next door. That's one example.

Ariana Brocious: And why is that?

Ryan Johnson: Because we don't have a drop of asphalt. We have lots of shade and the buildings are white, which reflects heat.

Ariana Brocious: Temperature reduction is really important in a city like Tempe, you know, in the Phoenix metro area as we're seeing temperatures continue to climb. Are there any energy efficiency aspects to Culdesac in terms of how you designed the buildings or where the electricity is coming from?

Ryan Johnson: The approach that we took in terms of, we didn't wanna include every single new technology, uh, because we wanted to focus on getting this project built because walkable neighborhoods are so much better than other neighborhoods for climate and all these things that the most important thing is building it. And by adding additional complex systems, things like rainwater recapture, it only makes it harder to get it done. Now that we've built this, the next ones are easier. When you're building something new in real estate, everyone asks, where's this been done before?

What's the comp? And now we can point to ourselves, other developers in other cities can point to us as well. so we could add more complexity over time, but the most important thing is building walkable neighborhoods and not having a sea of asphalt full of parked cars?

Ariana Brocious: Did you have a comparative example when you were planning this? Something you looked at either in the US or abroad?

Ryan Johnson: There wasn't one example. I've traveled a lot. You know, my story is I grew up in Phoenix in the burbs. I had an SUV and I'd only been to the beach in Mexico. And then, for college, I had this scholarship and they sent the class abroad and I went to Budapest and it blew my mind how much better a city like that is then the sprawl of Phoenix with great transportation and lots of density and energy and people and plazas, and it was thriving and that launched a passion for cities. And I visited 60 countries and lived in a few, and saw lots of ways to -

Ariana Brocious: Sixty? That's a lot of countries!

Ryan Johnson: Yeah. There's so many inspiring examples of bits and pieces across the world. There's not one place that most inspired Culdesac, but there's bits and pieces. A lot of the neighborhoods that, and cities that were built before cars, so a lot of them are in Europe, places like

Tokyo. But we took all of those and made a brew that made sense in Tempe.

Ariana Brocious: So what do you think are some of the trends we need to be looking at to understand the future way people use cars in the US?

Ryan Johnson: The biggest trend is that the day of, of everyone having their own private vehicle that's parked 95% of the time is ending. And that's been a long trend actually. So we're now 15 years into Lyft and Uber where people can start to get rides from that, to include as a portfolio in their portfolio of options. And Waymo, by bringing the cost down substantially and the safety dramatically up, that's gonna remove car ownership for, for most Americans. It's only a matter of time. There's a demographic tidal wave. The majority of every generation would pay a premium to live in a walkable neighborhood. And it's 92% for Gen Z.

Ariana Brocious: I want to push back a little because I think that as appealing as it is to live in a walkable neighborhood, in a walkable part of town, I can attest to that myself a bit, there are just these fundamental structural realities of how we've designed the US, especially the western US, where you kind of do need a car in a lot of places, even if you don't need it, perhaps, day to day you need it to get to another city. We don't have trains, you know, connecting major cities. Our bus system is pretty antiquated. Like I want to believe that there's a brighter future, a less car dependent future, and I still don't know that that's where we're gonna go.

Ryan Johnson: The biggest reason why people have a car is because we've mandated that we build cities that have lots of parking, which means things are spread out, which means that people need a car to get places and we've mistaken people buying a car for demand that they want that when in fact they didn't have a choice. But if we build our cities differently, and that's what we're doing here at Culdesac and we're showing other cities and developers that you can build walkable neighborhoods again in the US and the 2020s, and this is 17 acres, it's not changing the whole city. It is very hard to retrofit a city. But we've also forgotten how to build new cities in the US and only 3% of the land is developed. And so we're gonna be able to build cities where a lot more of the area is walkable. And the benefits really compound because when you have a walkable neighborhood next to a walkable neighborhood, it's more than twice as good.

Ariana Brocious: Where else are you looking to expand?

Ryan Johnson: We've got a couple projects that are under construction in Atlanta. We're building a project that's even larger than Tempe in Mesa, which is a wonderful suburb here in Tempe that's also on the adjacent to Tempe, that's also on the light rail. And it's a 26 acre parcel that's right in the core of their downtown by the new Arizona State campus. And it's been vacant for 30 years. They've been looking for the perfect project to do there. And when, when they visited Culdesac Tempe, they said, we would love for this to be over here in Mesa. So that's gonna be another wonderful project. There's other projects that are earlier at the planning stages. Look forward to sharing more soon. But the biggest thing is that people want to have things like this in their area. They should know that it's possible they should visit Tempe and use this as an example.

Ariana Brocious: This episode of Climate One is really focused on congestion pricing, And we're talking mostly about what's happened in New York City where this policy has been put into place. What's happening in Culdesac is different, but it's another way of approaching this idea of car dependency. And so I'm curious just what you think about congestion pricing as a policy.

Ryan Johnson: You might not be surprised that I think it's been a great policy and the evidence shows that. Congestion pricing only seems radical because unfortunately, we've allowed car-centric policies to be the norm in our cities for the past 80 years, and that's disconnected us. It's bankrupted

our cities, it's damaged our planet, and it never made sense for one person in a car to block 40 people on a bus. You've got London, Stockholm, New York City that are showing there's a better solution. And this is funding better transit. It's encouraging smarter land use, and it shifts incentives for better outcomes. So if we're serious about climate and most major issues today, we have to get serious about how we control externalities and we can't keep letting cars be more important than people.

Ariana Brocious: Ryan Johnson is co-founder and CEO of Culdesac. Thanks so much for joining us on Climate One, Ryan.

Ryan Johnson: Thanks for having me.

Ariana Brocious: After talking to Ryan Johnson, I was really curious to see Culdesac myself. I happened to be in Phoenix for a clean energy conference, so I dropped by on a Tuesday afternoon.

Ariana Brocious: All right, I'm here. at Cul-de-Sac, a car-free community in the city of Tempe. Just walking around getting a sense of it. It's late afternoon in late May, so it's already pretty warm. The buildings are built close together, so there's a fair amount of shade. Some nice native vegetation, a couple little pathways between some of the apartment blocks. it feels a little bit like a Greek island or something with whitewashed walls. A lot of the doors are painted bright colors like blue or yellow. And there's a little shopping district. Oh, there's a dog boutique and a dog spa. My goodness.

And I'm passing like a big patio. That looks nice. It's got a metal awning kind of like punch tin shade. It's cool. And then sort of a beer garden type place that looks nice. There's a barber shop, a vintage clothing store, couple little gift boutiques. Lots of bike parking. And there's a street right here. So from the street, it looks like just a normal apartment complex really.

Kousha Navidar: So what did you think after visiting in person?

Ariana Brocious: It was nice! Like a more thoughtfully designed apartment complex with extra green space. It didn't feel quite like a European city, because it's still a pretty small area, and you're surrounded by strip malls and six-lane streets. It was very quiet, maybe because of the time of day or week I visited. I imagine it's busier on weekends.

Kousha Navidar: Sure, Tuesday afternoon doesn't scream "party time."

Ariana Brocious: I will say, I think you'd get more of a sense of pedestrian lifestyle with a neighborhood of a larger scale. You know, there's a similar kind of retail/condo/dining district in Tucson that's really popular, and on the light rail line here - it's clearly a thing people like, so maybe we'll see more of them!

Kousha Navidar: And that's our show. Thanks for listening. Talking about climate can be hard, and exciting and interesting — and it's critical to address the transitions we need to make in all parts of society. Please help us get people talking more about climate by giving us a rating or review. You can do it right now on your device. Or consider joining us on Patreon and supporting the show that way.

Ariana Brocious: Climate One is a production of the Commonwealth Club. Our team includes Greg Dalton, Brad Marshland, Jenny Park, Austin Colón, Megan Bisciegia, Kousha Navidar, Kevin Lemons and Ben Testani. Our theme music is by George Young. I'm Ariana Brocious.