

The traffic congestion problem in toronto



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Traffic congestion is a problem which faces many large cities around the world. Many cities face the problem of traffic gridlocks especially during rush hour periods when employees are rushing to or from work. In Toronto, this is a major problem which threatens the long term economic growth of Canada mainly due to economic losses attributed to the congestion. In North America, Toronto is the fourth most congested city after San Francisco, Chicago and Los Angeles. Toronto was actually ranked last among cities in North America based on the average time employees spent commuting per day, which was eighty minutes. This rating is worse considering that it involved assessment of all transport forms and not only automobiles. In addition, only 30% of car owners in Toronto leave vehicles at home, which add to the congestion (Steve 2010).

This congestion has an adverse cost to the economy especially due to idle time by employees, fuel wastage during traffic jams or lateness in deliveries. These costs add up to over \$2 billion annually which is a great concern to any economy. In addition to these economic losses, there are other repercussions of traffic congestion including environmental pollution, which translates to millions of dollars in health care costs to affected people. It is important to understand reasons behind traffic congestion in Toronto in order to develop effective solutions to this problem. This paper will evaluate the traffic congestion in Toronto, assess the possible reasons for the problem and advance viable solutions which will help end the traffic problem in the city. The discussed issues will be summarized at the end.

Traffic congestion in Toronto

As has been discussed, Toronto is the most congested city in North America judging by the transport delays experienced by residents. Traffic congestion is experienced when traffic volume is generally higher than the available road capacities. This is also known as saturation and it is simply a situation where demand for roads is greater than the supply. Generally, causes of traffic congestion are categorized into two; recurring and non-recurring causes. Recurring causes of traffic congestion are caused by traffic issues which recur such as ineffective management of capacity, unrestrained demand and insufficient capacity. Non-recurring causes are those which occur due to unique circumstances which are not normally experienced. These include work zones, car accidents, bad weather, disabled vehicles and emergencies. For purposes of this paper, the recurring causes of traffic congestion will be addressed since this forms the major part of congestion of traffic in Toronto.

Key reasons for increase in congestion

There are several reasons which have played a role in increasing traffic congestion in Toronto. Some of the causes of recurring traffic congestion in Toronto will be briefly discussed below;

Increased automobile use

The increase in use of automobiles is one of the major causes of traffic congestion around the world. As has been discussed, Toronto is the most congested city in North America with over 70% of automobile owners driving to work. In addition, pedestrians and bicycles also compete for the limited road resource. This causes a strain on roads and contributes heavily to the

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congestion experienced in Toronto (Halberstam 14-17). Many automobiles carry one or two passengers as opposed to public transport where several people are transported by buses. This also increases congestion since more private vehicles are used to ferry very few passengers between various locations. The increase in automobile use also has adverse effects on the environment since there is more pollution from automobiles. Idle time experienced by automobiles as a result of traffic jams also increases pollution by automobiles. This pollution not only harms the environment but also causes respiratory infections and illnesses to humans which translate to a huge cost to the economy.

Poor planning

Every government planning department or ministry is tasked with the responsibility of ensuring that the population growth matches available resources to reduce strain. It is therefore the responsibility of the government to ensure that resources such as roads are well planned and developed to cater for the population growth. However, the Canadian government has performed poorly in developing roads which cater for the large population in the country (Conrad & Finkel 55-58). For instance, some experts have pointed out that on some roads, bike lanes have been placed in poor locations. These lanes have not been connected to other routes, which is wastage of space and money. In addition, some bike lanes have been placed in thoroughfares which are major and in addition to contributing to the congestion, parking and stopping spaces are drastically reduced. Some pedestrian crossings have been placed in dangerous locations where they cause a reduction in traffic flow as opposed to easing traffic.

Lapse in implementation of laws

There is a notable inconsistency in implementation of the law which regulates traffic. It is unclear whether this is done intentionally but experts have blamed it on ignorance and corruption. Parking and traffic laws are generally not evenly applied for all types of vehicles. In addition, many motorists who commit traffic offenses are not dealt with in a harsh manner in order to act as a deterrent to other motorists. This creates a situation where motorists are ignorant of traffic laws, which further complicates the problem of congestion.

Effects of traffic congestion in Toronto

There are various effects of traffic congestion in Toronto and these will be discussed below;

Pollution

Due to the increase in the number of automobiles in use in Toronto, the city has experienced high pollution levels than many cities in North America. Toronto is one of the most congested cities in North America and pollution levels are high due to high automobile usage. Many automobiles used emit high levels of carbon monoxide and other gases which harm the environment and the health of the public (Lerner & Wilmoth 74-81). Over 1500 people die annually in Toronto due to diseases which are related to environmental pollution. In addition, over 6000 people are admitted to hospitals in Toronto annually due to complications related to pollution and motor vehicle usage is a large contributor to this problem (Ruddiman 81-87). Pollution due to increase in automobile use is therefore a major problem which causes economic costs to Toronto through damage to the environment and adverse

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effects on the health of residents. Traffic congestion also results in idling of automobiles which leads to more pollution on the environment.

Idle time and opportunity costs

A lot of time is spent by workers in Toronto commuting to and from their place of work. Toronto was ranked last in terms of commuting time spent by employees when using different forms of transport and this was seen to be an average of eighty minutes. This is a lot of time since workers spend over an hour commuting daily to and from their place of employment. The costs of this idle time to the economy have been estimated to be over \$2 billion annually (Roess et. al. 34-37). These are opportunity costs which would have brought even greater value to the economy. In addition to idle time by employees, there are the costs of fuel used during traffic by the many automobiles which use the roads. Such costs also run into the billions as vehicles burn fuel in traffic each day. These costs experienced due to idle time are opportunity costs which would have been used for development purposes and development of infrastructure by the Canadian government.

Delays

Traffic jams usually lead to delay for either employees to reach their work stations or for products to be delivered on time. It also makes employees be late for meetings, flights or other opportunities which further their career. Delays may have a negative impact on individuals, the government or businesses at large. When individuals get delayed, they may miss certain opportunities which may result in earning lower disposable incomes which adversely affects their families. When there are delays, businesses suffer from lower sales due to delays in supplies or other factors. When delays

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occur, the government may also earn lower revenue due to lower tax received from decline in opportunities associated with the delay. Delays should therefore be avoided since they have negative effects to the society at large. This can only be achieved if viable solutions to the problem of transport congestion are implemented.

Barriers to emergency services

When there are traffic delays, it becomes difficult for emergency services to reach people in need. Emergency vehicles usually find it difficult to navigate through Toronto due to the problem of traffic congestion. Ambulances and fire trucks usually take longer than necessary to reach their destinations due to traffic congestion. This is very dangerous for Canadians since many people may continue losing lives due to delays in emergency service provision. It is imperative that urgent solutions to the problem of traffic congestion in Toronto are developed in order to ensure residents have access to fast emergency services.

Viable solutions to the problem

There are several solutions which will help reduce traffic congestion in Toronto and these will be discussed below;

Encouraging commuters to use public transport

It has been discussed that one of the reasons why there is traffic congestion in Toronto is that over 70% of automobile owners use their cars as opposed to public transport. Since private cars mostly carry one or two people, there are very many private cars which are needed to transport employees to and from work. These private cars cause congestion in roads due to their large

numbers. In order to ease congestion, public transport should be encouraged since it involves transporting many people simultaneously hence easing traffic congestion. Trains and public buses carry hundreds of people simultaneously which reduces the number of private cars on roads. The government should discourage the use of private cars especially within the city through making it expensive to drive and park private cars within the city. Parking fees for private cars should be increased to discourage use of these vehicles within the city. This will encourage more people to travel by train or buses which will ease traffic on roads.

Decongesting public transport

Although public transport is very effective in reducing traffic congestion, it has to be effective to achieve this goal. The public transport system in Toronto faces certain weaknesses which contribute to the traffic congestion experienced in the city. Many subways including the Yonge subway is very crowded yet this is one of the most important subways in Canada. Although there is a plan to computerize control and signals system in order to enable a greater number of trains to run closer together, this plan will take some years to implement, which means that Canadians will continue facing transport congestion in the short run (Preville 2010). There are also problems with train capacity and speeds with commuters complaining some trains are too slow and have low capacities. This is a problem which should be addressed by the government through increase in number, speeds and capacities of transport trains.

Decentralizing businesses from the Greater Toronto Area

There are very many businesses which are present in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). As a result, many employees commute from suburbs into the GTA each day. The large number of people who commute to the GTA is one of the major reasons why there is traffic congestion. In order to reduce congestion, it is important for the government to encourage investors to invest in suburbs or the outskirts of the city (Wallace 65-69). This is one of the most effective solutions to this problem since fewer people will travel to the GTA. When many businesses are decentralized and established in suburbs and outskirts of Toronto, the traffic systems will face lower congestion due to the reduced number of users. In addition to benefits of decentralization to the transport system, decentralizing businesses will also ensure that there is balanced development in Toronto and Canada as a whole. This will raise the standards of living of people and reduce the gap between the poor and the rich.

Investing in transport infrastructure

In order to cater for the growing population, the road infrastructure should match population growth. Since the transport system in Toronto is congested, it is important to invest in new and more effective transport infrastructure to ease the congestion. One of these types of infrastructure is investment in subways. Subways which run under major roads are very effective means of easing traffic congestion in most major cities. The government should construct such subways and offer commuters a variety of choices to make when making transport decisions. Other infrastructures include billing systems which discourage the movement of private cars into

the city. These billing systems may resemble that used in London where cameras monitor vehicles entering congested zones and require motorists to pay a certain sum of money. Motorists who do not pay receive very heavy fines. Such a billing system may be required to adjust the rates according to traffic movements. This will ensure that traffic congestion is eased in Toronto.

Passing relevant transport legislation

In order to ensure motorists comply with changes which have been suggested in the paper, stronger legislation is required to ensure that private cars are discouraged from entering the city and that any traffic offenders receive harsh punishments. This will serve as deterrent to other offenders who are not keen to be part of the traffic decongestion efforts. For instance, in London, private cars entering congestion zones pay 8 pounds in fees. However, people who do not observe this rule pay a harsh fine of 120 pounds. There are cameras which records all registration plates of motor vehicles hence it is difficult not to comply with the rule. Toronto requires legislation and policies which support traffic decongestion to be passed in order to develop long term solutions to the problem of traffic congestion.

Dialog with stakeholders in transport industry

In order for the government to ensure that changes required to the transport industry are effectively implemented, all stakeholders should be involved in the changes. The government should convene a meeting with stakeholders in public and private transport with the aim of developing long term solutions to the problem of traffic congestion (Quentin 16-22). These people may offer very effective solutions to this problem since they are the major road users.

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The general public will also be keen to follow changes and recommendations made to improve the transport sector once it is involved in developing solutions to the problem. Dialog with stakeholders will provide the government with an opportunity to listen to a variety of suggestions on how the transport problem can be resolved.

Summary and conclusion

Various aspects of traffic congestion in Toronto have been analyzed in detail. It is clear that Toronto is facing a serious problem of traffic congestion since it is the most congested city in North America. Traffic congestion in Toronto costs over \$ 2 billion annually and it is caused by a variety of factors. These factors are categorized into non-recurring and recurring factors. However, the paper focused on recurring factors which contribute to the largest proportion of traffic congestion in Canada. These include increased automobile use, poor planning and lapse in implementation of laws which govern traffic systems. This leads to the use of many private cars by employees who commute to work as opposed to use of public transport systems resulting in congestion. Traffic congestion in Toronto has various adverse effects including barriers to emergency services, delays, idle time and opportunity costs as well as pollution. These effects have adverse effects on the health, welfare and economic development of the society as whole. All stakeholders in society suffer either indirectly or directly from traffic congestion.

There are several solutions which should be implemented to reduce traffic congestion in Toronto. These include encouraging commuters to use public transport, decongesting public transport, decentralizing businesses from the

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Greater Toronto Area, investing in transport infrastructure, passing relevant transport legislation and dialog with stakeholders in transport industry.

These solutions aim at discouraging the use of private vehicles and increasing the effectiveness of public transport to increase the capacity and speeds needed to reduce congestion in Toronto. However, it is important to involve all relevant stakeholders when developing solutions to the transport congestion since as earlier discussed, these people may offer very effective solutions to this problem since they are the major road users. The general public will also be keen to follow changes made to improve the transport sector if it is involved in the change process. This will ensure that Toronto has one of the best transport systems not only in North America but across the world.