

## TUT-POL CASE STUDY

# Congestion Charging in Stockholm: The Path from Opposition to Advocacy

## Summary

In August 2007, Stockholm introduced a congestion charge for cars crossing the city's inner boundary, aimed at reducing traffic flows into central city areas. The decision followed a seven-month trial taking place from January through July 2006 and a public referendum that followed just seven weeks later, coincident with both national and city elections. Although a polling organization had found only 43 percent support among the city's voters just prior to the pilot, seeing congestion charging work in real time during the trial period changed public views, producing a 53 percent majority vote in favor of the charge. At the time, no other city had implemented a congestion tax based on the results of a referendum. From the moment of the trial and onward, public acceptance of congestion charging has continued to grow. Today, congestion charging is not only a centerpiece of Stockholm traffic management; it is also a major source of revenue for transit and road investments throughout the greater Stockholm region—possible because the charge is a national tax and not a local charge. Stockholm's success in implementing congestion charging is noteworthy, because such measures tend to be rejected by citizens and politicians as heavy-handed despite being almost universally proposed by transport planners. Moreover, in the period immediately preceding the referendum, most of the political parties in Stockholm and at the national level, with the exception of the Greens

(and local Stockholm Party), had rejected or avoided congestion charging as a serious policy priority. Even the Social Democratic mayor who introduced and managed the pilot project, which laid the groundwork for the policy's successful enactment, had originally opposed congestion charging during her electoral campaign.

**This is a story of ongoing discussion, conflict, and compromise unfolding over several decades involving different political parties and in a key watershed moment, the professional career of a controversial mayor, whose astute policy management and leveraging of support from several levels of government laid the political and institutional groundwork for others to permanently connect congestion charge revenues to local and regional investments in transport infrastructure and housing development.**

## Strategic Actions

### **Turning a potential political defeat into an opportunity to challenge conventional expectations.**

Pressured by the local Green and Stockholm Parties and her own Social Democratic party colleagues at the national level to move forward on congestion charging against her own campaign promises, Mayor Annika Billström “saved face” by introducing a trial rather than a full-blown policy, skillfully managing the trial’s implementation so as to bring key private sector actors on board, and strategically timing a citizen referendum so it would follow only after Stockholmers actually experienced the full-scale experiment.

### **Structuring public engagement to solidify administrative legitimacy and widen support for a controversial policy.**

The referendum, by keeping open the possibility that a permanent congestion charging policy might ultimately be rejected by a majority of voters, helped solidify public support, mainly by introducing elements of democratic accountability.

### **Re-conceptualizing the issues at stake in order to minimize contention and partisan criticism.**

Mayor Billström framed the congestion charging policy not as a done-deal mandated by others in the Social Democrat-Green coalition without concern for Stockholm, but as an experiment on which local citizens would vote and have the final say on their city’s transport future.

Forced to uphold the positive referendum result following their victory in the general elections, the Centre-Right Alliance (led by the Moderates) justified backtracking on their previous opposition to congestion charging by reframing the congestion charging as a financing mechanism for regional transport investments, including roadway investments (to the benefit of their conservative and auto-oriented constituency). Such reframing also facilitated the inter-party and regional consensus necessary to gain parliamentary approval.

### **Recruiting and empowering a technical team to package transport knowledge in a politically-savvy manner.**

In advance of the trial, transportation planners and administrators made significant expansions in bus service and new subway cars to indicate to voters that they were “getting something” from the charge. During the trial, the city ran a public outreach and education campaign that communicated in clear and accessible terms the trial’s purpose, workings, and benefits.

## Tactical Actions

**Introducing a trial at *full scale* (with as few exemptions as politically feasible) so as to demonstrate significant impact and in adequate duration so that constituents not only fully experience and understand how the policy works but also grow accustomed to the positive change.**

**Ensuring the technical proficiency of the operating system by engaging politicians, planning professionals, and private sector partners from early on and proactively troubleshooting together as needed.**

**Overcoming bureaucratic intransigence and inertia by convening working groups across departments and with direct reporting channels.**

**Cementing region-wide consensus for policy package by accommodating differing local priorities.**

The successive Conservative-led local government gained regional support for congestion charging by agreeing to allocate much of its net revenue toward construction of new suburban expressways.

**Finding allies across different levels of government so as to generate resources for facilitating both programmatic progress and longer-term institutionalization.**

The success of congestion charging required both national-level decision making (parliamentary approval) and negotiations (the Billström administration utilized available funding sources through party channels and higher levels of government to minimize local expense and burden in undertaking the trial) as well as city-suburban negotiations (re: regional transport investment package) and policy making and implementation within the city itself.