

What Is Downtown DC For?

The decongestion pricing debate is really about recovery, access, and what the city wants to become.

Date: March 2026

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Background

The current conversation over congestion pricing in Washington, DC, stems from a study authorized by the DC Council in 2019, completed in 2021, and not publicly released until 2026. Because the study was based largely on pre-pandemic assumptions about traffic, commuting, and transit ridership, its release came in a materially different downtown context shaped by increased telework and uneven economic recovery. The policy discussion is also being informed by the first year of Manhattan's congestion pricing program, which officials say has already produced meaningful early improvements in travel conditions and revenue generation, as well as by a DC mayoral campaign in which at least some leading candidates have indicated support for pricing as a policy option. As a result, the issue has reemerged not simply as a transportation question, but as a broader test of what downtown DC is for and how the District should manage access to it.

A Rorschach Test

The DC Decongestion Pricing Study is a Rorschach test, because people are not just debating the results; they are projecting different ideas of what downtown DC is for. Whether road pricing, as presented in the study, is good policy is a genuinely hard question, which is why a useful approach is to steelman both sides. The real fight in DC, though, is not over whether a model says traffic falls 7 percent or 11 percent. It is over what downtown Washington is now, what it should become, and whether the city's real problem is congestion, recovery, or a moving target of both. The report itself – thorough and serious – is very much of a moment: launched before Covid reshuffled downtowns, completed in the middle of extraordinary uncertainty, and released into a city still not entirely sure what downtown is for. I feel for the modelers. Their job is to inform decisions under uncertainty, not

conjure certainty where none exists. But precision is not the same thing as confidence, and a forecast cannot be treated as stable if the city underneath it is still moving.

The Basic Case for Pricing

The case for pricing starts with a point so basic economists often skip saying it out loud: scarce things should be managed. Peak-period road space is scarce. When you do not price it, you do not get fairness or free access; you get rationing by traffic jam — delay, unreliable buses, circling for parking, all the friction that comes from pretending something limited is abundant. People still pay, just in time and aggravation instead of money. That is the core logic of the study, and of the urbanist case for pricing more broadly. **The stronger version is that the status quo is not neutral: DC is already charging people to reach downtown, just not in dollars.** A congestion charge would not create a cost where none exists. It would replace a hidden, unmanaged price with an explicit one.

What the DC Upside Could Look Like

The DC-specific upside could be real. The study's downtown scenarios show vehicle entries falling about 7 to 11 percent, speeds rising 14 to 24 percent, and gross annual revenue ranging from about \$350 million to \$670 million, depending on geography and design. Just as important, the modeled drop in people entering downtown is much smaller than the drop in cars. For work trips into the small downtown study area, 57 percent of workers already used something other than a vehicle, and among DC residents that figure was 75 percent. That does not make Washington some post-car paradise. People who do not drive to work still drive at other times, because cars are useful when you can afford them. But it does mean the downtown commute market is less car-dominated than people may assume. And if the study is even directionally right, pricing would reduce vehicle trips without anything like a proportional reduction in people reaching the core. **That matters, because the point would not be to keep people out of downtown, but to change how they enter it.** On that view, congestion pricing is not just a traffic policy — it could be a way to make downtown access more reliable, which could itself be part of a recovery strategy.

The Strongest Case Against It

The strongest anti-pricing case, though, is not that road pricing is bad economics. It is that DC in 2026 is not obviously solving the same problem Manhattan was. The mayor's letter gets at that directly: the study was completed in 2021, relies on pre-pandemic assumptions about traffic, commuting, and Metro, and at points reads as though the old downtown demand structure is more likely to rebound than to fundamentally change. The study itself is more cautious than some of its enthusiasts, explicitly recommending pilots, incremental implementation, and more study. That is prudent, and for good reason. Downtown DC, like many downtowns, is still in recovery. Office vacancy remains above 20 percent, and vacancy is not the same as in-person daily attendance. District employment is still below 2019 levels, and the city's own strategy is about filling empty space, repurposing obsolete office buildings, and getting people back downtown. But commuting patterns are only part of the story. Street-level recovery matters too, and the picture there is uneven — hotel revenue has recovered, retail vacancy remains stubbornly high, and downtown's fiscal contribution is still well below its pre-pandemic level. Downtown DC, in other words, is not going through one clean recovery. It is going through several at once. It's entirely reasonable to ask whether a congestion charge would help or cut against it.

The Federal Complication

Washington's problem is also unusually tangled up with the federal government – which is why comparisons to other cities are imperfect. A 2023 GAO review found that 17 of 24 federal agencies used 25 percent or less of their headquarters capacity during sample weeks. More recent ULI work describes a Washington office inventory full of aging, underused federal buildings that are expensive, unattractive to tenants, and hard to reposition – a bad combination if that's not obvious. Even with recent pressure to return to the office, the physical and economic footprint of federal work is changing. Every big downtown got hit by Covid and remote work. DC then took an extra hit from federal retrenchment and telework, and later another from layoffs and contraction tied to DOGE. These are structural problems, not blips, and structural problems don't clear up quickly.

Why DC Is Not Manhattan

That's why the Manhattan comparison matters. In Manhattan, a congestion charge can plausibly be understood as a price on excess demand. In Washington, it could look more like a price on marginal demand – the worker, visitor, or diner you are still trying to coax back might just stay home. Manhattan's commute market is overwhelmingly transit-based, with roughly nine public-transit commuters for every solo driver. Downtown DC is nothing like that. Even in the study's own numbers, it is a much more mixed-mode market. Nor is Washington Midtown Manhattan in density, foot traffic, or sheer inevitability; the mayor is right on that point. The study's own "large downtown" concept stretches into Rosslyn and National Landing (ahem, not in DC), which is a reminder that the regional core is both linked and competitive. DC, Maryland, and Northern Virginia may rise together in the broad sense, but at the margin they compete for jobs, tenants, residents, and activity. If DC makes downtown incrementally harder to access, some of that demand may not vanish. It may simply move across the river or over the city line.

The Practical Politics

Then there is the practical politics of all this, which in Washington can never be an afterthought. The study lays out a thicket of implementation and coordination hurdles – FHWA, NCPC, NPS, SHPO, CFA, congressional, and others – plus the very DC-specific problem that viewshed rules and monumental-core aesthetics make ordinary tolling infrastructure awkward. But those are not just technical obstacles. Because a downtown charge would affect federal workers, Congress and the White House would hardly be quiet. Neither has been shy about treating DC as a laboratory for intervention. Underneath all of this is a broader political problem: even when the economics of a policy are sound, trust matters. Policies that alter the status quo are much harder to sell if the public does not trust government to spend the revenue well, or if the pitch amounts to "this new charge is actually good for you" without doing the work of persuasion first. If Washington were ever to do this, it would likely have to be framed as a visible bargain tied to benefits people can actually see.

The Bottom Line

So I think it is perfectly reasonable – maybe even rational – to be genuinely torn. The best case for pricing is that DC, like any city, should stop pretending scarce road space is free and manage it with prices instead of queues. More than that, the affirmative case is that downtown recovery may be harder if access to the core remains slow and unreliable; that is not a neutral baseline, but a policy choice of its own. The best case against is that, in a post-pandemic capital with fragile downtown demand, a shifting federal footprint, and an unusually ugly set of veto points, DC may be pricing the

wrong scarcity for the moment. That is why the study is a Rorschach test: people are not just reading the same report differently; they are reading it through different theories of downtown DC. **The real dispute is not about numbers, or whether price signals work. It is about what counts as success for downtown DC now – and whether the city will be confident enough in that answer to start charging people in dollars instead of minutes for entering it.**