

Intelligence MEMOS



From: Benjamin Dachis
To: John Tory, Mayor of Toronto
Date: January 9, 2018
Re: **HOW TO JUDGE THE KING STREETCAR PILOT**

As a King West resident, I am one happy commuter with the new streetcar-priority lanes on King Street. But many car-bound commuters from elsewhere [are not](#). The debate on this new scheme will rage through to this year's municipal election. The City needs to present the proper metrics, not just of streetcar travel speed, but to also demonstrate whether the new priority lanes have increased overall capacity of the road.

For one year, streetcars have been given priority over all other vehicles for a 20-block portion of King Street in the heart of downtown Toronto. Most vehicles are only able to turn right at most intersections, not go straight through. That gives the 65,000 daily passengers on Toronto's [busiest surface transit route](#) an uninhibited right-of-way separate from the 20,000 daily vehicle passengers.

The metrics so far are great news for streetcar riders: the mean travel times for streetcar commuters during the evening rush hour are down [by 20 to 25 percent](#). But, how do we know the pilot is the best use of roads, a valuable municipal asset?

Congestion occurs when demand for the road exceeds capacity. We all know that experience. But, believe it or not, there's such a thing as [too little congestion](#). Remember that time you whipped down a highway early in the morning? The available road space at the time far exceeded demand. If roads were always like that, that would be a symptom of overinvestment.

The proper measure of efficiently used road space isn't speed, but overall capacity. The ideal level of congestion is the point at which the total flow through a road is maximized. Too little traffic – and high speeds – means the road can handle more vehicles. Too much traffic slows speeds and total road capacity. That means governments need to step in to curb usage, either through a road toll or traffic management schemes like the King pilot.

Too little congestion doesn't happen on the roads very often because demand almost always increases to the point where we return to congestion. That's because we don't put a price on using roads (a topic for another day). The subsequent increase in road users means we start [complaining about congestion](#) shortly after making a new transportation investment. That's also something to keep an eye on for King Street. The City of Toronto needs to find that happy medium of reducing congestion but not wasting valuable road space. For the King Street pilot to become permanent the city must demonstrate evidence that it improves overall roadway capacity. Presenting data promptly on overall road usage – not only streetcar speeds – will properly frame the debate over the King Street pilot.

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