

Brussels plans to start with congestion charges, but Flanders and Wallonia are heavily opposed. In an open letter published in De Morgen and Le Soir to the President of the Walloon Region, IFP president Geert van Waeg explains to them why they should embrace it (translation here).

Embrace the smart car kilometer reduction in Brussels

Dear Mr. Magnette,

Like any change, the plans for the Brussels congestion charge (“smart kilometer charge”) raises controversies. Is this a disguised tax or an attack by the people of Brussels on the Flemish and Walloon wallets? Or - as you now say - something that affects low incomes and will have to be delayed beyond 2024?



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Whether it concerns the city boulevard at the end of the E40, or the strip in the Wetstraat that was returned to cyclists and pedestrians, we always hear a lot of roaring (“They are going to export the traffic jams”). Once put into practice, however, it turns out to work surprisingly well, as in many other cities where similar changes have been initiated. We understand that the car lobby reacts like stung by a wasp when a small piece of its privileges is questioned. But are politicians really still getting carried away by that discourse?

The low-income people you refer to have not grown intimately attached to their car. It is outdated to categorize citizens as one-dimensional pedestrians, cyclists, users of public transport or motorists. We are people who choose the means that are best for us to get from A to B. This depends, among other things, on the availability of a car, a bicycle or good train connection, but also on how easy and cheap parking is, and above all, how safe it is to go on foot or by bicycle. When I take the car, I constitute a danger to you as a pedestrian or cyclist. In itself a miniscule danger, but all hundreds of thousands of daily car journeys together pose a real danger. In 2019, 20 people were killed in the Brussels Region, of which 8 were pedestrians, plus 177 seriously injured and 4,398 slightly injured. On top of that are all the medical consequences of air pollution. Those numbers have to go down.

We have to make choices. In the limited space, we cannot adequately accommodate more active road use and more car traffic. What Brussels is doing now is to actively encourage road use by making it safer and more pleasant, on the one hand by 30 km/h as the standard, and on the other by giving back (breathing) space. **The intended result of the smart kilometer charge is a smart car kilometer reduction.**

And that will work. We Brussels residents crave for that. But people from Wallonia or Flanders, rich and poor, also will benefit from it. For many of those who already come by bicycle, train or bus, the situation will be safer and more pleasant at no extra cost. For the car users, the choice tomorrow is either to (partially) change mode, or, for a certain cost, to still come by car but with fewer traffic jams. A win-win in both cases!

Please stop putting energy into conservative denial, and embrace this valuable initiative. Let Wallonia and Flanders cooperate constructively with Brussels on this smart car kilometer reduction. Perhaps some of the collected charges can flow back to Wallonia and Flanders, whether or not in combination with the levying of a reasonable percentage of personal income tax at the place of employment. Please go for an open dialogue.

Finally, allow me to support party colleague Minister-President Rudy Vervoort and his entire Brussels government team. We will all benefit from it, and Brussels will become more mobile, safer and healthier. Thanks.

Geert van Waeg is a resident of Brussels and president of the International Federation of Pedestrians. He writes this piece in his own name.