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COLUMN ONE

In London, a levy for sins of emission

The mayor has pushed a carbon emissions charge that could cost drivers of gas guzzlers in the central city \$50 a day.

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LONDON — The Hackings, like many of their neighbors, are a two-car family. Every morning, Giles Hacking gets into his Mercedes CL500 in West Kensington and drives to his office across town near London Bridge.

Sarah Hacking piles the three children into the Jeep Cherokee and drops them off at their schools. Often, her mother pitches in and delivers one of the youngsters.

Soon, though, multi-car families like the Hackings may be wishing all they had to contend with was London's \$8-a-gallon gasoline. In an unusual municipal experiment aimed at fighting global warming where the rubber meets the road, the British capital in October is to begin imposing a \$50-a-day carbon emissions fee on every gas-guzzling private vehicle driven in the central city.

Even for the Hackings, who live in one of London's better neighborhoods and earn a good income from an old family import/export business, that will be a significant jolt: \$100 a day for the school and work runs, \$150 if Grandma gets involved.

"It's outrageous," said Sarah Hacking, expressing a sentiment that appears to elicit a strong amen from many of those here who drive the big sport utility vehicles that Mayor Ken Livingstone refers to derisively as "Chelsea tractors."

"We'd have a massive loss if we tried to sell our cars. And I can't have a tiny little car because I have three children who go to three different schools," she said.

"At the moment, we just have to pay. We really have no choice."

The new fee, adopted by the mayor after a long consultation with the public, has prompted threats of a lawsuit from Porsche and anger from many London drivers, some of whom have vowed to make it a central issue in the campaign leading to the mayoral election May 1.

For five years, London has been assessing drivers a daily "congestion charge," now set at \$16, to drive into the central city and a large swath around it, a fee designed to tackle the infernal bottlenecks that have turned much of London into a parking lot.

The program has become a test case for major cities around the world. The New York City Council this week voted for a three-year trial program that would impose an \$8 charge on vehicles entering Midtown and Lower Manhattan, a plan that still needs approval from the state Legislature.

San Francisco has studied imposing a charge as a way of easing central-city traffic jams; cities in Norway and Sweden have also flirted with congestion pricing; and Singapore has been charging downtown drivers since 1975.

But London's pending carbon dioxide emissions charge goes beyond traffic control and establishes one of the first significant municipal climate change programs in the world.

It is designed to lure -- some would say shock -- Londoners out of their big Porsches, V6 Mondeos and 4x4s and into respectable Priuses or Renault Clios.

Drivers of the lowest-emitting cars would no longer have to pay the \$16-a-day congestion charge to enter the central city.

The north Italian city of Milan in January launched a one-year trial program requiring drivers who enter an inner zone to buy an "Eco Pass," with cars emitting large quantities of CO2 or running on dirty diesel engines having to pay as much as \$14.70 a day. But people who live in Milan's city center face a maximum payment of \$387.50 a year; in London, inner-city residents could be paying \$12,000 or more.

In a separate London program decreed by the mayor in February, high-polluting trucks driving anywhere in the city must pay a fee of \$400 a day. By 2010, the standards for particulate emissions will be tightened again and even large vans, if they are polluters, will be hit with a \$200-a-day charge.

Trucking organizations had opposed the program, arguing that it was expensive and would bring few benefits, but it has been overwhelmingly popular among cycling and health groups such as the British Lung Foundation.

The national government has also gotten into the act, last month proposing a new showroom tax of nearly \$1,900-per-car after 2010 on high-emission vehicles.

Livingstone said the car emissions program was designed to make sure "that those who choose to carry on driving the most polluting vehicles help pay for the environmental damage they cause."

The goal, he said, is to "have an impact throughout the world, with other cities following suit," and to "start a cultural revolution whereby drivers in every city in Britain start to think about the impact on the environment of their choice of car."

So far, the revolution appears to be shaping up mainly in London, where many in the SUV set are preparing to try to throw Livingstone out on his ear when he comes up for reelection. A YouGov poll last month put Conservative challenger Boris Johnson, who wants to reevaluate the congestion charge, 12 percentage points ahead of Livingstone.

"Why is it being done? Because Mr. Livingstone wants to lord his green credentials, and it's a good way of raising money, because clearly some people will pay the charge," said Roger Lawson, London region coordinator for the Assn. of British Drivers (who is preparing to ante up on his Jaguar XJ Sovereign).

The program is enforced with a series of well-marked cameras posted at the borders of the central city and at strategic locations inside. Motorists' license plate numbers are logged, and those who haven't paid the charge -- either online, or by phone or text message, or at several kiosks and markets throughout the capital -- are mailed a \$120 ticket. The penalty hasn't yet been set for the emissions charge program beginning in the fall.

City officials believe the adoption of the original congestion charge has cut overall traffic by 21% and boosted ridership on public transportation 36%.

The number of vehicles driving into central London each day has dropped by 70,000 since the charge was introduced in 2003.

Much of the \$252 million a year raised under the existing congestion charge has been poured into the city's bus system, which has undergone a remarkable transformation and now offers citizens clean, reliable and frequent transit alternatives.

But actual congestion -- the amount of time people sit fuming in their cars -- crept back up after an initial plunge, and is now nearly as bad as ever, thanks to an expanding population and major road works projects, along with improvements for pedestrians and bicycles that take up road space.

"Our argument is if congestion charging wasn't there and all those things happened, which they would, for good reason, you would just see mayhem on central London's roads," said Michelle Dix, director of planning for the congestion charge program at Transport for London, which also runs the city's public transportation system.

Many businesses believe the current congestion charge has hurt them and that the new CO2 charge will be even worse.

"The local electrician or the service engineer who needs a larger vehicle to carry his tools will be affected. The corner shopkeeper who needs to collect stock from the Cash and Carry will be affected," the Federation of Small Businesses said.

Porsche, whose 4.8-liter Cayenne and 3.8-liter 911 would take the \$50-a-day hit under the CO2 program, has signaled that it probably will challenge the new regulations in court.

One of the other big concerns about charging for CO2 while dropping the congestion charge for "green" cars is that the financial incentive could become so great to go green that the result could be an actual *increase* in cars pouring into London -- and thus a negligible reduction in CO2 emissions.

City officials say they have thought that through, and acknowledge that it could happen, though not immediately.

"We will monitor the scheme, to be sure that the congestion benefits we've got now aren't undermined," Dix said.

"If for some reason or another this proposal leads to an increase in [low-emission] vehicles coming in and increasing congestion, we will change it."

The city is counting on some big-car owners switching to smaller cars while automobile manufacturers find a new incentive to develop lower-emission vehicles. Already, the charge has become a marketing ploy.

"If you're London based and still want a sporty or prestigious car, there are plenty to choose from that come in under that nasty £25 CO2 barrier. And some are very surprising indeed," one ad in a London newspaper said last month.

Of course, Dix acknowledges, some people will refuse to be priced off the road.

"They'll continue doing whatever they want to do," she said. "But let's face it, in central London the maximum speed limits are 30 miles an hour, and in many parts they're 20 miles an hour. So why do you need a high-performance car that will go 150 miles an hour? You certainly don't need it."

Record producer Jonathan Shalit doesn't *need* his Mercedes 500 SL for the drive from his house in Kensington across town to his office in Soho. But he likes it, and he can afford it.

"Someone like me who has a big, fat, gas-guzzling Mercedes 500 probably deserves to be taxed to the hilt. I like big cars, and I'm wealthy enough," said Shalit, who is probably best known for discovering singer Charlotte Church.

On the other hand, Shalit already has picked up on London's ubiquitous green zeitgeist, and even before the new CO2 charge debuts, he's started riding his bicycle to work three days a week. Last month -- even he couldn't believe it -- he test drove a new Lexus hybrid.

"I'd have to say overall, I'm not convinced [the charge] is bad. If I'm really honest. Because we have to do something drastic in London," Shalit said. "I do know that London's too crowded. I do know there are fumes about. It's a fundamental challenge citizens have, how do we go forward and deal with the challenge in big cities?"

"And when all the rhetoric's over, no one's got a better idea."