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Harmful expansion or efficient highways? Switzerland's motorway debate

Switzerland wants to invest 5.3 billion francs in motorway expansion aimed at cutting traffic congestion. Opponents argue this will encourage even more traffic onto the roads. On 24 November, voters will decide whether to approve the contentious plan.

THEODORA PETER

Switzerland has been criss-crossed by motorways from east to west and from north to south for the last 60 years. The A1 at Grauholz near Berne is one of the oldest sections of Swiss motorway. Around 16,000 vehicles a day used to pass over this stretch of tarmac in the 1970s. This has since increased to a whopping 100,000, meaning congestion at rush hours. The section was widened to six lanes in the 1990s. Now the federal government would like to extend it to eight lanes – in one of six road projects to be funded by a national credit of 5.3 billion Swiss francs. Other projects include motorway expansion near Lake Geneva, a new road tunnel under the Rhine in Basel, and additional tunnels near St. Gallen and Schaffhausen.

A 40-strong alliance of environmental organisations and political parties has called the projects excessive. The group has managed to initiate a referendum opposing the parliament-approved funding, which is why the matter will now be put to voters on 24 November 2024. “The notion that you can prevent traffic congestion by building roads is a relic from the last century,” says the Green na-

tional councillor for the canton of St. Gallen, Franziska Ryser, who co-chairs umverkehR, a group campaigning for a rethink on motorised travel. Instead of investing in “fossil-fuel mega projects”, public money would be better spent on shifting traffic from roads onto railways, she adds.

A case of chicken or egg

Opponents of the expansion view motorways as climate killers. Not only is road traffic responsible for around a third of carbon emissions, but the vast amounts of concrete and steel needed for big projects like these generate harmful greenhouse gases too, they say. Then you have noise pollution and the loss of valuable green space. The Bernese Farmers' Union has also spoken out against the Grauholz expansion, which it says will destroy several hectares of agricultural land.

The core message of the No campaign is that more and wider roads can only bring brief respite. By expanding motorway capacity, you are creating the wrong incentives and, therefore, causing more congestion in the long term. The question of whether more roads actually lead to

more traffic is difficult to answer, say experts. For Carsten Hagedorn, who is a professor in traffic planning at the Eastern Switzerland University of Applied Sciences, it is a classic case of the chicken or the egg. “What came first, the traffic or the roads?” Ultimately, we build roads where there is a demand for these roads, Hagedorn told Radio SRF. And new roads shorten the time we spend travelling. “Travel times are an important factor in deciding whether to take the car or a different mode of transport. Road expansion can therefore make the car option much more attractive.”

Congestion is costly

For supporters of the Yes campaign, the expansion is solely about relieving congestion. Traffic infrastructure

The six-lane Grauholz section of the A1 motorway is to be widened to eight lanes. This expansion will encroach on the agricultural land that you can see in the background.

Photo: Keystone

The Grauholz section of the A1, Switzerland's oldest stretch of motorway, was opened on 10 May 1962. Crowds braved the rain to greet the first motorists. No one had installed crash barriers.

Archive photo: Keystone



built over 60 years ago no longer meets the current needs of people and businesses, says Thurgau SVP National Councillor and businesswoman Diana Gutjahr. “Workers stuck in traffic jams are unable to

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FRANZISKA RYSER, NATIONAL COUNCILLOR FOR THE GREENS (CANTON OF ST. GALLEN), FROM THE NO CAMPAIGN

work.” And they can’t just commute by train instead, she argues. Some 48,800 hours of congestion were recorded across Switzerland’s national road network in 2023, 22 per cent more than in the previous year. According to Gutjahr, traffic congestion generates costs of around 1.2 billion

francs a year. When goods and services take longer to get from A to B, they become more expensive.

Another argument put forward by the Yes campaign is that the projects will provide relief to residential areas, with free-flowing traffic on Switzerland’s main arteries helping to reduce traffic on alternative routes. If commuters have fewer traffic jams to worry about, they will be less inclined to make detours onto local roads or neighbourhoods. And this will improve quality of life for people in towns and cities.

Three other proposals will be put to the electorate in November (see box). For Swiss Abroad who own and let property in Switzerland, votes on two bills affecting landlord/tenant rights are of particular significance.

Yes campaign:
www.zusammen-vorwaertskommen.ch
No campaign:
www.autobahnwahn.ch

Overview of all the votes on 24 November 2024

Credit to increase motorway capacity

In 2023, parliament endorsed a formal step to increase national motorway capacity: a credit of 5.3 billion francs to fund six different projects that will see the construction of additional lanes as well as new tunnels on heavily frequented sections of motorway. A 40-strong alliance of organisations and parties opposes the projects, calling them harmful, expensive and pointless. Centre-right and right-wing politicians who support the bill say that the projects are solely about relieving congestion (see main article).

Landlord/tenant rights I: Stricter rules on subletting

Tenants who wish to sublet an apartment or room will in future require written consent from the owner – and will also have to provide more information on the intended subletting. Verbal consent has been sufficient until now. Tenants who break the rules could have their rental agreements terminated. The Swiss Tenants’ Association and the left-green parties oppose the changes.

Landlord/tenant rights II: Termination for personal use made easier

Parliament has approved a bill that would make it easier for landlords to terminate tenancies if they want to set aside their property for personal use. Until now, landlords have had to prove that they need their property “urgently” for personal use or for use by close relatives in order to terminate an existing rental agreement. The left-wing parties call the bill a “brazen attack by the landlord lobby” on tenants’ rights, while centre-right and right-wing politicians think the changes are fair.

Standardised health insurance funding model

Every area of the healthcare sector – outpatients, inpatients, and care – is currently subject to different funding regimes. By introducing a standardised funding model, parliament hopes to incentivise cost savings, e.g. more outpatient treatment instead of expensive hospital stays. Potential annual savings would total 440 million francs per annum. Switzerland’s public services union (VPOD/SSP) opposes the reform, saying it will lead to a decline in healthcare working conditions and in the quality of care provided.

