

Plan to Toll Bridges Encounters More Roadblocks

by {ga=dking}

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Senate Majority Leader [Malcolm Smith](#) wants an [audit](#) of the [Metropolitan Transit Authority](#) before he moves ahead to consider a plan to bail the agency out with tolls on city bridges, a payroll tax or other revenue. Critics

[call](#) Smith's maneuver a smoke screen, a pull for time, because, they say, he does not have the votes to pass any such bill. Supporters call it sensible.

No matter how you see it, though, Smith's move seemingly makes it impossible for the Senate to address the MTA's dire financial straights before the legislature gets into the most intense parts of the state budget process.

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The April 1 budget deadline looms ominously over discussions of MTA financing. Supporters of the MTA bailout privately say that if Albany does not take action on a rescue bill this week it will get lost in the shuffle, and before anyone realizes it, March 25 will arrive rife with horror for those who rely on mass transit.

That day has come to represent doomsday for transit riders. The MTA warns that, without further assistance from the state, it will then have to begin implementing drastic fare hikes and service cuts to close its \$1.2 billion gap.

How drastic would the service cuts be? According to a helpful [Website](#) provided by New York City [Comptroller](#)

[William Thompson](#)

, very. The number of station agents would be reduced; the W and Z lines would be eliminated; the G and M lines would be shortened; fewer trains would run on evenings, nights, weekends and at midday; and bus service would be slashed. Bus and subway fares are expected to rise by \$.50 to \$1.00, and weekly and monthly card prices would cost 5 to 10 percent more than they do now.

Avoiding 'Doomsday'

The [bailout plan](#) proposed by Richard Ravitch, which was put into [draft](#) legislation by Gov. David Paterson, would enact \$5 tolls on the East River bridges, institute a payroll tax in areas

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that receive MTA service and increase fares.

Last week, Paterson gave supporters of the bailout hope when he pushed legislators to move on the plan before budget negotiations heated up. Then Assembly Majority Leader [Sheldon Silver](#) introduced a [compromise plan](#) that would [institute \\$2 tolls](#) on East River bridges. But late last week it started to become clear that the proposed bailout faced overwhelming opposition in the Senate.

Smith said his conference was "concerned" that MTA officials had approved Silver's compromise when they previously had insisted a \$5 toll was necessary to span their budget gap. He then called for an audit of the MTA. The MTA responded by handing over financial data, with a pledge to provide more. Paterson initially claimed that the senators were satisfied with the data and ready to move forward. [Liz Benjamin](#) of the Daily News, however, [reported](#) that Smith indicated that a review of the numbers is ongoing.

Silver, who was initially [praised](#) for his compromise, has been cautious since the impasse in the Senate became apparent. The speaker has insisted he has enough support in the Assembly to pass the legislation but has said there is no use in passing a one-house bill. Without Silver pushing his conference to support the measure, more Assembly members seem to be coming out against it.

Despite the impending doom for those who use the MTA subways, buses and trains for their daily commute, the number of legislators who oppose the MTA bailout seems to be increasing, and they don't seem particularly concerned about the consequences.

Opposition in the Senate

A populist message about the working New Yorker vs. the rich fat cat informs the arguments of a number of legislators who oppose the bailout, and the MTA's [history](#) of providing unreliable accounting only fuels their distrust of the authority. Opponents insist that passing a bailout plan does not provide any guarantee the MTA won't cut service and hike fares anyway.

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Sen. [Ruben Diaz Sr.](#) of the Bronx said that he is concerned with how the proposed bridge tolls on the East River will affect his constituents' wallets. "Taxi driver have to pay, too, and they will have to increase their fares. Who is gonna pay for that? The people," he said.

Brooklyn Sen. [Carl Kruger](#) [told](#) the Daily News that he would never vote for any bill that puts a toll on East River bridges and that the MTA bailout is "all smoke and mirrors." Kruger wants more financial transparency from the MTA.

Assemblyman [Jose Peralta](#) of Queens shares Krueger's suspicion of the MTA, which Peralta called "an unsupervised pseudo-entity." He said the tolls would, "win approval by Robert Moses the master builder himself, with their idea to seal off Manhattan Island and make it only affordable to the wealthy." He added, "To make matters worse, the MTA seems to employ accountants that practice Bernie Madoff-like accounting; it just doesn't add up, and New Yorkers shouldn't have to suffer or afford any more insults."

A number of other outer-borough senators stand against the tolls as well as, the entire Republican conference, according to statements by Senate Minority Leader [Dean Skelos](#) . Skelos has

[said](#)

his conference would likely oppose the plan because it did not include any funding for upstate roads and bridges

There could be some backing for a bailout among the city's senators. Sen.

[Bill Perkins](#) of Manhattan has [indicated support](#) of Silver's plan but noted, "We have to proceed with caution, and maybe some refining."

Advocates of the bailout also hold out hope that some Senate Republicans will vote for the bailout.

"Stranger things have happened," Neysa Pranger of the [Regional Plan Association](#) said. She hopes that Republicans from districts that rely on mass transit will vote for the bailout. Noting

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that manufacturing plants in places like Yonkers and Plattsburgh produce rail cars and other equipment for the MTA, Pranger said legislators from those districts could realize such jobs will be at stake if the MTA should further falter.

Splits in the Assembly

Even if some Republicans were to vote for the bailout, many outer borough Democrats in the Senate and Assembly remain opposed. Peralta, who stood with Comptroller Thompson last week in opposing the toll plan, said that a letter expressing opposition is being circulated in the Assembly. The letter, as of press time, had 20 or so signatures. Peralta said when there are 30 legislators sign the letter, it will be submitted to Silver.

Thompson has proposed a [plan](#) that would increase registration fees on vehicles in areas that receive MTA service; the fee would be based on the size of the car. Thompson said during a press conference his proposal was preferable to tolls because, "Harlem and East River tolls would burden many hard-working people who live in boroughs other than Manhattan and would drastically hurt small businesses, many of which already are struggling in this economy,"

Assembly members who support Thompson include Adriano Espaillat, Jeffrion Aubry, Michael Benjamin, Nelson Castro, Jeffrey Dinowitz, Aurelia Greene, Carl Heastie, Hakeem Jeffries, Rory Lancman, Alan Maisel, Jose Peralta, Adam Clayton Powell IV, Phil Ramos, Jose Rivera, Peter Rivera and Helene Weinstein.

"The last thing we need to do right now is impose a thousand-dollar-a-year tax on working New Yorkers driving into Manhattan, especially when the MTA is offering no new mass transit options so these commuters could actually use the system they're being taxed to fund," Lancman recently said.

"Placing tolls on the Harlem and East River bridges will impose a heavy burden on a relatively small portion of the population who already has fewer choices," Espaillat said at Thompson's press conference.

Not all outer borough legislators stand against the bailout. Assemblyman

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[Michael Gianaris](#) of Queens has expressed discomfort with the plan and has publicly wavered in his support of it but was recently [quoted](#) as saying that he supports it because he does not want to see his district lose the W line and a bus line.

Peralta does not completely oppose a bailout, however. He said he stands against the tolls but supports the payroll tax. Tolls, he said, are "not needed to fill the budget gap, the payroll tax will."

In addition, Peralta thinks the legislature needs to have more control of the MTA. "If we are going to bail them out I want to ensure that the state legislature would oversee them," he said.

It is not clear where many upstate Democrats will come down on the bailout but the likelihood is that, because Silver has stuck his neck out to push the bill, most of them will fall in line behind him. Smith's Senate majority is so thin, though, that the dissension of just two senators such as Diaz and Krueger could make upstate support a moot point. However, if Smith does actually move on legislation it will be because has support from the upstate delegates.

A Question of Fairness

The payroll tax could face greater opposition from Assembly members representing suburban districts. A number of these legislators say their communities do not receive an equal amount of service from the MTA as the city and therefore should not be straddled with the same financial burden.

Sen. [John Bonacic](#) of Mount Hope said that the payroll tax is "inequitable and discriminatory" against small businesses in his district. Orange County's economy "is not a city based economy," he told an MTA hearing. "Only 4.8 percent of Orange County residents use public transportation to get to work and that doesn't mean MTA transportation necessarily -- it could be local bus service where available. Contrast that to Westchester where 20 percent of workers do, or Brooklyn where 60 percent of workers use the MTA."

He concluded, "I'm here to tell you that Orange County simply does not value the product you offer enough to consent to yet another tax to help pay for that product. You need to look elsewhere to preserve what is primarily the

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city's transportation system."

Pranger said Bonacic's constituents probably should receive better service from the MTA. But, she said, "that won't happen unless we can get beyond the current crisis."

She said legislators need to look at the bigger picture: the survival of New York City as a whole. Pranger pointed to the 1970s, when New York's transit system was in decay and residents who moved out of the city cited that as an impetus for leaving. "The city lost one out of every five jobs back then," said Pranger, "and that is not when we need right now."

"The vitality of the city is based on its transit system. It is good for the city and good for the region. Maybe they should ask themselves what would happen if the transit system should falter. And the answer is not that hard to imagine."