

Will the Critics Kill Congestion Pricing?

by Bruce Schaller

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Mayor Michael Bloomberg proved prescient when he introduced congestion pricing in his Earth Day address as “the elephant in the room.” Before Bloomberg even delivered the [speech outlining ways](#) to make the city more environmentally friendly, some politicians shot down the most controversial idea: charging drivers \$8 to travel below 86th Street during rush hour.

"I think congestion pricing is a non-starter," said State Senator John Sabini prior to the speech. "We're one city. I don't think we should penalize people for where they live."

The criticism, mainly from representatives of areas outside of Manhattan, hasn't subsided.

U.S. Representative Anthony Weiner, who plans to run for mayor in 2009, charged that the proposal "creates class conflict" and constitutes a "regressive tax on working middle-class families and small-business owners."

In a [press release](#) provided by the Queens Chamber of Commerce, City Council Finance Chair David Weprin called the proposal "another unfair tax which would hurt working-class people."

Walter McCaffrey, a former City Council member and spokesman for the Keep NYC Congestion Tax Free Coalition, said the idea that the fee would be kept at the mayor's proposed level of \$8 per day is a myth. "Anyone who thinks it's going to be \$8 is either delusional or they are trying to deliberately hoodwink the public," McCaffrey [told the Daily News](#).

On the Fence — Or in Favor

So is the mayor's plan for congestion pricing dead on arrival?

Don't count on it. Some elected officials such as Brooklyn Borough President Marty Markowitz, who has vehemently opposed tolls on the East River bridges, and Bronx Borough President Adolfo Carrion are keeping an open mind. Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver said he would like

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to see "what the proposed benefits are, and I'd like to see what the impact on business is projected to be."

The proposal has substantial support from business groups such as the Partnership for New York City. A coalition of 70 organizations and individuals ranging from the American Lung Association to the Citizens Budget Commission and General Contractors Association came out strongly in favor of the mayor's plan.

The plan can also attract federal funds to pay for the fee-collection system. U.S. Secretary of Transportation Mary Peters, in a statement following Bloomberg's speech, said the congestion pricing plan "is the kind of bold thinking leaders across the country need to embrace if we hope to win the battle against traffic congestion."

It is important to remember that this is just the start of the debate.

The mayor is clear about his commitment to his plan. He has prevailed in other areas where his predecessors failed, such as taking over the city school system. In cities such as London and Stockholm that have adopted congestion pricing, the idea gained support after strong initial opposition.

What the Charge Will Buy

As the debate continues, it is likely that New Yorkers will focus more on the benefits to them personally and the city at large. The mayor's proposal is not just about charging tolls.

Congestion pricing fees, combined with city and state contributions, would underwrite a new transportation financing authority that would fund \$31 billion in transit projects in the metro area. The list of projects includes completing the Second Avenue subway, bringing the transit system and city roads and bridges to a state of good repair, implementing a total of 10 bus rapid transit routes, building a new rail tunnel from New Jersey to Manhattan and adding bus lanes to East River bridges.

Far more people will benefit from the mayor's plan than will be affected by the congestion fee.

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The mayor correctly pointed out that only 5 percent of New York City residents drive to work in Manhattan.

Even in outlying areas of the city that lack subway service, public transit commuters outnumber auto commuters by two to one or even three to one.

Transit commuters who currently endure hour and a half commutes can greatly benefit from the mayor's proposed upgrades to transit services, ranging from express buses to better utilization of the commuter railroads' city stations. If New Yorkers understand the benefits to their commutes, won't these folks weigh in with their elected officials?

Perhaps the most biting criticism is the claim that a fee is an unfair tax on the working person. Yet the fact is that outer borough auto commuters tend to have higher incomes than subway commuters, so a fee that improves transit is actually more equitable than the current system. In fact, auto commuters who use the free bridges are being subsidized by transit users whose taxes pay for bridge reconstruction and maintenance. Is that equitable?

What's the Alternative?

Opponents will also have to respond to the public's increasing focus on environmental aspects of this issue. The mayor pointed out that childhood asthma rates are four times higher in the city than nationally. How unfair are steps to reduce vehicle emissions that carry these severe health effects?

Given the public's desire to see something done about traffic congestion, opponents will also have to convince people suggest that they have a better idea.

Councilmember Weprin called for "simple traffic mitigation alternatives to reduce congestion," but the city has made major avenues one-way, timed signals to maximize traffic flow, restricted turns and taken numerous other auto-friendly steps. Will the public buy the idea that a few more tweaks will significantly reduce congestion, especially in light of the anticipated city's growth?

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Congestion pricing clearly faces an uphill climb. But the more New Yorkers understand the benefits of the mayor's entire plan, the more support congestion pricing is likely to increase.



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