Congestion Pricing And The Future Of NYC: Addressing The Objections

by Bruce Schaller
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In his much-anticipated speech on long-term planning for New York City , Mayor Michael Bloomberg laid out “10 aggressive but achievable goals” to meet the “three major challenges” of the future. One of the major challenges, he said, will be an expected explosion in population growth; one of the goals within that challenge will be to make sure traffic congestion “doesn’t bring our economy grinding to a halt.” And what would assure this? In his speech, the mayor talked about “adding to the capacity of our regional mass transit system, so that travel times stay the same â€“ or get better.” But members of the panel discussion immediately afterwards specifically touched on whether congestion pricing â€“ charging a fee to use congested streets or highways â€“ should be used to provide traffic relief.

The mayor’s highlighting of the traffic issue came on the heels of two major reports, released a week earlier, on the traffic problem and congestion pricing as a potential solution.

The Partnership for New York City, a leading business group, released a report estimating that traffic congestion costs the region’s economy over $13 billion per year and over 37,000 lost jobs . The Manhattan Institute, a conservative think tank, released a study, (which I was commissioned to conduct) which concluded that congestion pricing need not be the political non-starter that many people think it is, if it is carefully crafted to target the times and places where congestion is most severe.

Presentations on these two reports and an ensuing discussion at a Manhattan Institute forum are ably summarized in Streetsblog and the overall issues in Tom Angotti’s Land Use column on Gotham Gazette.

Meanwhile, Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer called on the city to apply for a federal grant to study congestion pricing, following in the footsteps of San Francisco. Councilmember Gayle Brewer announced that she plans to introduce a congestion pricing bill in the City Council to begin a public discussion of the issue.

Several newspapers weighed in with editorials , all saying much the same thing â€“ it’s worth considering.

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As the focus on congestion pricing intensified, pricing opponents stepped up their efforts to argue against a pricing plan. A newly formed group called the Committee to Keep New York City Congestion-Tax Free is being led by former Council member Walter McCaffrey. Queens Council member David Weprin has also been an outspoken opponent.

Opponents believe that they have the upper hand in this debate. Indeed, there is evidence for this view. Mayor Michael Bloomberg avoided mentioning congestion pricing in his speech. He was previously quoted in the New York Times as citing political obstacles in Albany as a reason to keep pricing off the agenda. The New York Post reported that Bloomberg would only support congestion pricing if all city residents â€“ who account for most trips into the Manhattan Central Business district â€“ were exempt.

Yet to achieve traffic relief, no other measure would be as effective as congestion pricing. What counterargument do opponents of pricing put forth? At the Manhattan Institute forum, McCaffrey declared, “A tax is a tax is a tax.”

Emphasizing an anti-tax message appears to be a smart strategy. In the focus groups I moderated for the Manhattan Institute study, it was clear that if people start by focusing on congestion fees as a tax, it is almost impossible to get them to consider possible benefits that might make it a worthwhile program. Opponents may be able to short circuit the debate by defining congestion fees as simply another tax.

An assessment of their arguments shows why they may want to end the discussion with the “tax is a tax is a tax” argument. Let’s take a look at the arguments that opponents are making.

1. Charging motorists to use the East River bridges amounts to a tax.

At the Manhattan Institute forum, Weprin commented that he personally, as well as his constituents, detour to the Queensboro Bridge to avoid the Midtown Tunnel toll. The result of their choice is to clog other people’s neighborhoods with their cars in order to use a free bridge that is maintained with millions of taxpayer dollars.

The anti-congestion pricing folks are thus not so much defending their right to be tax-free as their desire to have other people pay for the bridges they use â€“ with tax money, no less.

2. Auto commuters don't have access to public transportation.

There is no doubt that neighborhoods in eastern Queens, southeastern Brooklyn and Staten Island that are beyond walking distance of a subway station need better transit service. Trips that some days take an hour can take two hours on other days. This problem should be a focus of any plan that includes congestion pricing.

But it is simply not true to imply that therefore, there is no access to public transportation from these outlying areas. In fact, census data show that only 28 percent of Manhattan-bound commuters who live in eastern Queens, southeastern Brooklyn or Staten Island drive to work. All the rest take the subway, express bus, Long Island Rail Road or ferry. Auto commuters do not lack access to transit; they simply choose the convenience and comfort of their cars over the inconvenience, uncertainty and hassles of transit.

3. Auto commuters are not wealthy individuals.

Defining "wealth" in New York City is highly subjective. But census data show that Manhattan-bound auto commuters from the outlying parts of Queens, Brooklyn and Staten Island earn 35 percent more than their more numerous counterparts who take the subway. Drivers may not be wealthy â€“ but their less-wealthy neighbors would benefit from better public transportation that could be funded through congestion fees.

4. Drivers would park in neighborhoods just outside a congestion pricing zone, thus clogging streets and multiplying the parking problems in these neighborhoods.

Anyone who has searched for a parking space in downtown Brooklyn, Long Island City or the Upper East or West Sides of Manhattan would probably like to know exactly where commuters put off by a congestion fee are going to park in these neighborhoods. The only all-day parking I've been able to find is in garages that make a congestion fee look quite affordable.

A congestion fee is thus unlikely to attract drivers to park just outside the Manhattan central business district. A fee would, however, reduce traffic flowing through these neighborhoods since over one-half of the cars traveling in Long Island City, and nearly one-half in downtown Brooklyn, are bound for Manhattan. Reducing traffic into Manhattan would thus provide traffic relief not just in Manhattan, but also Queens and Brooklyn.

5. Congestion fees would burden people who use their car for business.

Some, perhaps. But a lot of business people would gladly trade faster traffic and more predictable travel times for a few dollars a day in congestion fees.

6. Congestion charging is a punitive measure.

This is in many ways the core of the anti-pricing argument. My focus group research found that fees are punitive â€“ "taxes" â€“ when there is no avoiding them. That's why providing decent transit service to auto-heavy areas is so important. It's also why it is important to point out that most drivers use their cars for reasons of comfort and convenience and do in fact have a transit alternative.

7. We should focus on trucks rather than autos.

Truck traffic is a problem for both motorists and for residents of neighborhoods beset by high truck traffic. Conversely, traffic jams are a problem for truckers and for businesses and consumers who pay inflated prices for goods deliveries. But the traffic problem can not be solved by dealing with trucks, which make up only a small fraction of total traffic, especially during rush hour.

8. The economic effects of the plan will be devastating.

The Partnership study is the most comprehensive and rigorous evidence of the costs of not having a pricing program in New York. The most authoritative study conducted in London found that the economic effects of congestion pricing were "broadly neutral" â€“ even without accounting for the value of travelers' time savings. An article in the Journal of Economic Perspectives concludes that overall benefits from the London pricing program far outweigh the costs.

9. Congestion charging in London has hurt businesses â€“ 62 percent of businesses in London reported a drop in customers.

There was a drop in business during a recession that happened to coincide with the congestion charge. In fact, however, most businesses feel the charging scheme has been positive or neutral for their business and most firms in the charging zone support the pricing program.

10. Improvements to public transportation service to eastern Queens such as more express buses and park and ride lots are badly needed.

Agreed. But do opponents have a way to pay for it? Maybe with someone else's taxes?

11. The answer to traffic congestion is enforcement of double and triple parked cars and taxis stopping in the middle of the street.

Yes, better enforcement is needed. Opponents can show the sincerity of their commitment by lobbying Albany to approve camera enforcement of bus lanes. But enforcement requires expensive police efforts (paid for, presumably, by someone's taxes) and will never be sustained at a level necessary to truly dent traffic congestion.

New York could well decide that it would rather live with traffic jams, even though they are only likely to worsen and lengthen as the city grows, than take the big leap forward of congestion pricing. New Yorkers might decide that they do not really mind the way that traffic affects our quality of life, our ability to get around by bus and taxi, and the lost jobs â€“ at least not so much as to set up an elaborate pricing apparatus. But I think it is worth having that discussion as part of the mayor's "conversation" about the city's future.

Bruce Schaller, who has been in charge of the transportation topic page since its inception in 1999, is head of Schaller Consulting, which provides research and analysis about transportation. He is also a Visiting Scholar at the Rudin Center for Transportation Policy and Management at New York University.Â