by Bruce Schaller
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Transportation plays a central role in all three of the central challenges that Mayor Michael Bloomberg said face the city over the next quarter century, as he explained during a speech that outlined his plan for New York in 2030 . New York City faces:

â€˜ the addition of a million more city residents (a projection that some dispute, according to the land use topic page by Tom Angotti) -- How will a million more New Yorkers move about the city without overtaxing the roads and subways?

â€˜ an aging infrastructure -- How will the aging infrastructure of roads, bridges and subways be brought to a state of good repair?

â€˜ environmental risks -- How can motor vehicle emissions be reduced to reach environmental sustainability goals?

As the city administration scurries to publish a detailed “sustainability” plan in March, it faces a challenge all its own: How can Bloomberg make his long-term plan have lasting impact when he has less than three years left in his term of office? Will the new sustainability plan be itself sustainable into the next mayor’s term?

BIG IDEAS, DIFFERENT CHALLENGES

The mayor and his chief aid working on the plan, Deputy Mayor Dan Doctoroff, are clearly attracted to big ideas. Doctoroff championed bringing the Olympics to New York long before he imagined being a City Hall insider. Bloomberg has successfully pushed for taking control of the city schools. Bloomberg also sought and achieved major rezoning on Manhattan’s far west side and the Brooklyn waterfront that will shape development of these areas for years after he leaves office.

There is no shortage of big ideas in transportation -- subway expansionsâ€¦. congestion pricing in Manhattan â€¦a freight rail tunnel connecting Brooklyn to the mainland United States. Getting big ideas implemented in transportation presents different challenges than in schools or zoning, however, with important implications for how to design a successful approach to transportation issues.

Possible Last-Minute Derailment

For one thing, to quote Yogi Berra, it's not over â€ till it's over. With control of the schools or rezoning, once the Legislature or City Council acts, the deed is done. Change may come slowly to the school system, but the mayor will be in control. Development may take many years on the west side, but the new zoning will continue to encourage it.

Big ideas in transportation, in contrast, can be derailed at the last minute. The Second Avenue subway will not be assured of construction until the financing is committed. If the mayor proposes congestion pricing, his successor could scuttle the scheme if it is not actually implemented by the end of Bloomberg's term in 2009.

Vehement Defense Of Status Quo

Another big difference between zoning and transportation is the prominence of defenders of the status quo. The West Side rezoning, for example, affects relatively few residents or offices. With transportation, changes to the use of roads are most critical where there are the most users: in the Manhattan business district, for example, and on congested highways and roads throughout the city. There are plenty of people, some within the mayor's own administration, who will vehemently defend maintaining the chaotic status quo.

Reliance On Other Levels Of Government

A final major difference is that the mayor controls only pieces of the transportation infrastructure. He does not control the subways, bus operations or state-owned highways. Yet his goal of reducing commute times, for example, necessitates close cooperation and coordination with the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA).

THREE SUGGESTIONS

Given the nature of the challenges, how should the mayor proceed with the transportation components of his sustainability plan? Let me offer three big ideas: fix the skewed economic incentives to drive, implement targeted transit improvements throughout the city, and make

more efficient use of the limited street space in congested areas.

Create Economic Disincentives To Drive

Transportation can very much benefit from the mayor and Doctoroff's penchant for big ideas. Current economic incentives are skewed in favor of driving since motorists do not incur the cost of delay they create for others, and many do not even pay for the bridges or tunnels they traverse or the value of the real estate they park on. Too many motorists drive simply because it IS more comfortable and convenient, and they create real costs for the city's economy and quality of life.

The economic signals need to fixed. That means congestion pricing for the Manhattan business district. Pricing should be applied as narrowly as possible, affecting only those motorists who by driving at the busiest times and places most contribute to slowing down everyone else. I've outlined a plan for peak period charges inbound to Manhattan in the morning peak period, outbound in the evening peak period, and for driving anywhere in the business district midday.

The mayor has expressed worries that congestion pricing is too unpopular to get it approved. My research shows that a targeted plan, combined with other steps I'll describe below, can win public support on the basis of being effective and fair and offering choices to motorists. Congestion pricing is a big idea which has been successful in London, Stockholm and Singapore. If tailored to New York's needs, it can create a legacy for the mayor in transportation in New York.

The main problem with congestion pricing is the tendency to think that this one big idea is sufficient. New Yorkers are actually very sophisticated about the multifaceted nature of the traffic problem. They know that traffic congestion has many causes, and that it's a citywide problem, so congestion pricing by itself is not enough.

Target Improvements Throughout The City

What else needs to be done? The key to making congestion pricing work is to bolster the public transportation system, especially in areas where many people use their cars. That means far better express bus service from outlying areas of the city. It means figuring out how to make the commuter railroads a meaningful part of the city's transit system. It means adding options for drivers such as park and ride lots. And it means spreading pricing strategies outside Manhattan, in particular, through tolled express lanes on outer borough highways.

The growth of the city also means adding rail capacity to handle the additional riders. While the Second Avenue subway and #7 extension will add new track mileage to the system, cost makes system expansion an inherently limited approach. Through technology such as computer-based train control systems, however, the effective passenger capacity of existing lines can be enlarged by increasing the number of trains that can be operated through the system. The MTA is slowly implementing these new train control systems. Speeding up that implementation could expand capacity of overcrowded lines in a matter of years instead of decades.

All of this will take money, lots of money, and that's where the second big idea comes in. The mayor will need to make a grand deal with the MTA and Port Authority on how the congestion fees are collected, who gets them, what it pays for and how the use of the money is guaranteed for the promised purposes. That grand deal would be another Bloomberg legacy.

In the most congested parts of the city from the Manhattan business district to downtown Brooklyn to Flushing, a complete package of transportation improvements should include giving priority to the most efficient uses of the public space. New York needs to accommodate growth not only underground, but also above ground. That means priority for buses, pedestrians and cyclists. The city Transportation Department declares in broad policy terms its support for new paradigms in looking at these issues, but in practice it is either slow to implement changes, or lets its historical mission of moving motor vehicles hold sway. The joint city/MTA project to implement five bus rapid transit lines, a noble effort, has been slowed by traffic engineers worried about the impact on traffic movement.

Finding the right balance is difficult, but studies aimed at finding that balance too easily lead to paralysis by analysis. The city has shown it knows a better way, as when it has implemented traffic plans for a limited period such as during the holiday season, and during the transit strike, or in a limited area such as the initial Midtown commercial parking Muni-meter program. The genius of these plans is that they are either temporary or limited in scope, so they do not undergo the time-consuming reviews to which more ambitious plans are subject.

Set In Motion Small But Efficient Steps

The mayor's sustainability plan could expand this approach. Why not try some seemingly good ideas on a pilot basis? Measure the outcomes. Then decide whether and where to apply them permanently. Armed with real-life results, the required studies should go faster and be more credible.

A host of initiatives are amenable to this approach:

â€˜ Raise the price of metered parking to encourage turnover and expand the availability of on street parking.

â€˜ Try to make bus lanes actually exclusive to buses by installing "soft" barriers like bollards and truncated domes and "quick curbs."

â€˜ Beef up enforcement of traffic rules like don't-block-the-box and, for taxis, pick up and drop off only at the curb.

â€˜ Close Broadway to traffic on Sundays in the summer.

• Even restrict Broadway traffic throughout the week (my favorite idea is to alternate one-way northbound with one-way southbound operation, allowing local traffic but eliminating through traffic.)

The pilots could also lead into some of the bigger projects that are still on the drawing boards. Take, for example, the well-known bottlenecks on First and Second Avenues where the M15 bus idles away much of the day. Why wait for the end of a multi-year study of bus rapid transit to deal with this? Pilot a truly exclusive bus lane to speed the buses through that morass.

Measure the results, make adjustments as necessary, and fold the changes into the bigger bus rapid transit program.

So the third big idea in the mayor's sustainability plan should be to set in motion a series of smaller steps that will gain a momentum all their own. As New Yorkers see the benefits of these pilots, they will demand them for their own neighborhood. It's a viral approach to transportation improvements that worked with bus rapid transit and high-tech traffic signals in Los Angeles. It's also an approach that can make the mayor's sustainability plan self-sustaining.

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