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Leaders blast congestion pricing

By Stephen Stirling

Queens elected officials railed against Mayor Michael Bloomberg's congestion pricing plan Tuesday, calling it an unfair tax that would break the back of middle-class residents and small businesses throughout the borough.

Opposition to Bloomberg's plan, which would levy a \$8 charge on all cars and a \$21 charge on all commercial trucks entering Manhattan below 86th Street, has been widespread since the mayor announced his support for the idea in an address outlining his PlaNYC 2030 initiatives Sunday.

Bloomberg's plan details 127 citywide initiatives designed to meet the city's expected growth of about 1 million people over the next two decades. Bloomberg championed the idea of congestion pricing as a method of making up part of \$31 billion in budget gaps attributed to several transportation projects he deemed "critical" to the city's future.

Queens Borough President Helen Marshall was joined by members of the City Council, the Queens Chamber of Commerce and local business owners Tuesday in expressing their outrage at the concept at a news conference in Jackson Heights. Marshall said the mayor needs to present a viable alternative to driving into Manhattan by bolstering the public transportation system before a serious conversation about congestion pricing can take place.

"There are ways of working these things out. Certainly we should do that before we do anything like congestion pricing," she said. "If we don't do that, then we're just taxing Queens."

Marshall said revitalizing existing aspects of the city's transportation infrastructure, such as reopening the more than a dozen abandoned Long Island Rail Road stations that dot Queens, would not only be more cost-effective solutions but would also create additional revenue for the city. At a separate event in Little Neck Sunday, City Councilman David Weprin (D-Hollis) said the city should crack down on double- and triple-parked cars, fine taxis that stop mid-street for drop-offs and regulate truck parking in Manhattan rather than institute a toll for commuters.

"Congestion pricing is an unfair tax that will burden commuters and other outer-borough residents," he said. "While the rich and upper middle class will absorb the fee, it will hurt working-class people."

Dominick Valente, owner of Valente Yeast in Maspeth, said the proposed charges would almost certainly cripple his business, costing him \$27,300 per year for the five trucks he sends to Manhattan daily.

"How many times can we go to the well?" Valente asked. "This is a significant and unfair cost that would hit people that can't afford it."

Former Queens Councilman Walter McCaffrey said the mayor's plan to make up part of the \$31 billion bill for transportation projects citywide with congestion pricing is ill-conceived.

"I think it's important that we recognize that congestion pricing is little more than a cruel hoax on the outer boroughs of New York City. The real challenge is where you come up with the bucks to do these things," he added. "They haven't done their homework in terms of how to prepare for something like this."

City Councilman John Liu (D-Flushing), chairman of the Council's Committee on Transportation, said many of the ideas presented in Bloomberg's plan are admirable but address the issue of congestion with backwards logic.

"Incentives must come before penalties," he said. "Otherwise the talk of sustainability is nothing more than at best a pipe dream and at worst empty campaign rhetoric."

Reporter Nathan Duke contributed to this story.