

Make A Field Trip for the Congestion Panel Worthwhile

Maybe seeing is believing. NYC is a 24 hour mixed-use town. London's downtown lacks the residential living that exists abundantly within and next to New York city's business districts in Manhattan south of 86th Street. If the commissioners leave JFK airport in Queens (will they take the AirTrain) or drive or be driven?) with open minds, eyes and ears, they'll see how the congestion pricing scheme many on the commission already advocate for New York makes absolutely NO SENSE. And just maybe, on the plane trip -- if they've not already, they might read the financials for Transport for London and notice the inability of that tax to raise any revenues that justify the scheme as a funding mechanism. Perhaps, they might review some alternatives already outlined in such reports as "Reducing Congestion – Financing Transit – Improving Air Quality" available at KeepNYCFree.com. [direct link: <http://keepnycfree.com/reports/files/2007-07-13%20Alternatives%20to%20Mayor%20Bloombergs%20Congestion%20Pricing%20Plan.pdf>]

Sunday, Aug. 26, New York Times City Section editorial:
A Field Trip for the Congestion Panel

The roster of panelists named to the 17-member commission to find ways to relieve traffic congestion in New York City is a mostly thoughtful and impressive one. Given that it includes both outspoken proponents and opponents of Mayor Michael Bloomberg's proposal for congestion pricing, its meetings should be lively. They should also be open to the public, which will have to feel invested in any plan that has a hope of working. In addition, it's vital that commission members be well-informed on the massive problem before them.

So we suggest that the commission's first order of business should be to book flights for the whole team to London and Stockholm, two cities that have come to embrace a system of congestion pricing as good for commuters and good for business.

Ken Livingstone, the mayor of London, has been preaching the benefits of London's four years of experience with congestion pricing. Charging cars and trucks a fee to enter the city's business district and use its busiest streets has reduced traffic by 20 percent and greenhouse gas emissions by about 15 percent. In Stockholm, a road use fee was tested for six months in the face of much initial opposition. Then it was put to a voter referendum, and won. The system is back in place and it's working.

Opponents tend to treat the tales of those two cities like mythology. But perhaps seeing will be believing. Commission members should hop aboard a regular double-decker bus in the heart of London; if Mr. Livingstone is correct, the bus should make schedule without problems, something that was almost unheard of in pre-congestion pricing London.

Of course, New York will have to tailor a solution to its own particular needs. Mr. Bloomberg's plan would charge cars \$8 and trucks \$21 dollars to drive south of 86th Street in Manhattan on weekdays, minus any bridge and tunnel tolls. There are many issues and details to be ironed out. Residents in areas bordering the congestion zone are rightly worried about parking; residential permits may help. Just five percent of the people commuting to Manhattan's busiest streets actually drive. But if these drivers are to be coaxed from their cars, planners will need to ensure there is a convenient mass transit alternative.

Time is limited. The City Council must pass a plan before the end of the year, and then legislators in Albany must reach a consensus before March 31 next year. The federal government has warned that its pledge of \$354 million in assistance depends on achieving an approved plan that reduces traffic by 6 percent, as Mr. Bloomberg's proposal would.

The commission needs to seize this moment to ensure the economic future and vitality of New York, as well as the quality of life for its residents and visitors. And Europe in the fall is wonderful.