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Pol doubts city's traffic estimates

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A member of the state panel evaluating congestion pricing knocked the city's traffic estimates because they were generated by a computer model that uses a 10-year-old survey of local traveling patterns.

"Will someone please tell me how a survey done in 1997 can tell you how long it takes to get anywhere in 2007?," said Assemb. Richard Brodsky, (D-Westchester), a vocal critic of congestion pricing. "The changes in behavior -- just telecommuting alone -- are impossible to measure because of the information is ten years old."

Brodsky was responding to a presentation from the city Department of Transportation about how they generated figures on traffic reduction in putting together Mayor Michael Bloomberg's congestion pricing plan. The meeting, the panel's second, preceded what was expected to be a packed public hearing on congestion pricing at Hunter College in Manhattan.

The mayor's plan calls for motorists to be charged \$8 to enter Manhattan below 86th Street between 6 a.m. and 6 p.m. The city's estimates show that congestion pricing would reduce traffic in the central business district by 6.3 percent.

The state Congestion Mitigation Commission has until Jan. 31, 2008 to recommend to the Legislature either the mayor's plan, or some other proposal that would result in the same reductions in traffic. The city wants to use the revenue generated by congestion pricing to improve mass transit.

The computer model, developed by the New York Metropolitan Transportation Council, a regional transportation forum, used trip diaries kept during 1997 and 1998 by 11,264 city households that indicated how and why they chose to travel a particular way for a given trip.

But, city officials said, that is only one factor, and the model is run using current population and employment figures, as well as updated travel times for particular routes. "It's the thought processes, not the numbers," said Bruce Shaller, the city Department of Transportation Deputy Commissioner for the Office of Planning and Sustainability.

The reliability of estimates about the impact of congestion pricing on commuting patterns only go so far, because the city would be changing so many variables of a traveler's trip all at once, said William Wheeler, director of Special Project Development and Planning for the Metropolitan Transportation Authority.

"It's a really unique situation," Wheeler told the panel, because the city would be changing both the supply of mass transit -- by adding new buses and routes, among other things -- and the demand for it at the same time, by making driving into Manhattan more expensive.

As a result, it's hard to know how much commuter habits will change and over how long a period of time.

"The question is, how many people will get on the Long Island Rail Road who don't get on today?" Wheeler said. "How many might try carpooling first, or maybe they'll take the train just a few days a week, or they'll drive to Jamaica and take the subway? We won't know exactly until we do it."

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