

Crain's Insider

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Ravitch's rocky start

The plan to rescue the Metropolitan Transportation Authority rolled out by Richard Ravitch is getting mixed reviews. Its payroll tax has been well-received, but the business community's support for the tax hinges on motorists contributing to mass transit. The commission would accomplish that with bridge tolls, but tolls have been panned in knee-jerk fashion by Queens and Brooklyn politicians.

"I worry that we're getting caught in this battle of 'No this, no that,' and nothing's going to happen," says Kate Slevin, executive director of the Tri-State Transportation Campaign. "If we don't do East River bridge tolls or the other recommendations, fares are going to go through the roof."

Criticism from activists like Corey Bearak of the Queens Civic Congress has been muted, but Bearak says that he's just holding back until a concrete plan emerges.

"There's no meat to the proposals," Bearak says. He foresees a replay of the congestion pricing fight if tolls are included in legislation.

The commission sought to make tolls palatable by dedicating revenues to new bus service, but that message has been poorly marketed. "There's been very little talk about the bus aspect of the Ravitch report," says Slevin. Critics want to replace the toll money with funds from jacked-up car registration fees, but Gov. Paterson wants that cash for the state's general fund, not the MTA.

If City Council approval is needed for bridge tolls, expect sweeteners like residential parking permits to reappear. The permits were proposed last spring to try to appease outer-borough opponents of congestion pricing. But when congestion pricing died in Albany, the city's transportation department shelved its parking permit plan.