

Pols: No Tolls On East River Bridges

BY JON CRONIN

To protest the proposed tolling of the East River bridges, a group of Queens politicians banded together in the shadow of the Ed Koch-Queensboro Bridge on Sunday to explain why the outer boroughs need free access to Manhattan.

Although Gov. Andrew Cuomo has not announced a plan to toll the bridges, tolls could be a part of his proposal for a congestion tax that could raise funds for the ailing MTA subway system.

Assemblyman David Weprin (D-Fresh Meadows) said that he and his colleagues are open to new ways to fund the MTA's rehabilitation, but opposed to taxing the bridges. Weprin pointed out that many residents in his district do not live near a subway and have to be driven to a station.

"It very easily is a two-hour commute from eastern Queens to midtown Manhattan," said Weprin.

He believes that many of his constituents would rather take the subway, but feel "they have no choice."

"Whatever proposal comes out,

we're willing to listen to everything, but we will not accept tolls on the three East River bridges, which have been free since 1911," said Weprin.

He noted that the city has faced numerous financial crises since then, but never resorted to tolling those bridges.

Thomas J. Grech, executive director of the Queens Chamber of Commerce, said that small businesses in Queens would suffer if the bridges are tolled.

"Doing business today in NYC is tougher than ever," he said. "Putting tolls on the East River bridges will be just another incentive for firms to think about relocating out of New York."

Moreover, Queens Borough President Melinda Katz noted that many people entering Manhattan are only doing so for personal reasons.

"There are many such reasons, including limited physical disabilities that make navigating stairs impossible, a need to carry tools or other items—especially when platforms



Photo by Jon Cronin
David Weprin (third from right) and Barry Grodenchik (second from right) discuss East River bridge tolls.

and cars are overcrowded, being ill and seeking specialty care at tertiary health centers as well as many others," she said.

Weprin also pointed out that many Queens residents receive healthcare in Manhattan.

"Most of those who utilize our East River crossings are lower- or middle-income residents who have seen their buying power reduced over the last decade. They should not be burdened by imposing tolls," said Kevin Forrestal, president of the

Queens Civic Congress.

Councilman Barry Grodenchik (D-Oakland Gardens) also blasted the proposal to add tolls to the bridges.

"Tolling the free East River bridges is a misguided proposal that is unacceptable to the residents of eastern Queens," he said. "These tolls are, in fact, a regressive tax on people who have limited public-transportation options and would impose an unjustifiable financial

burden on Queens residents, especially commuters, who are already struggling with rising costs of living. It is time for the MTA to get its fiscal house in order before further burdening area residents."

Grodenchik noted that the bridges that utilize tolls were built with bonds, which needed to be paid off. The three East River bridges were not built with bonds.

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