



## Boro Leaders Rip City's \$8 Car Fee

By MATT HAMPTON

After months of speculation and community input, Mayor Mike Bloomberg introduced his PlaNYC 2030 initiative Sunday, and caused quite a stir with several new announcements, including an \$8 "Congestion pricing" fee to drive into Manhattan below 86th Street.

Laying out his plan for the next 25 years of life in New York City, Bloomberg touched on topics as crucial as parks and green spaces, transportation, and sustained affordable housing. The initiative that caused the most reaction was the traffic alternative that has already been called a "tax on the poor," by its many opponents.

On the whole, many city legislators were pleased with the recommendations of the plan, including Council Environmental Protection Committee Chair James Gennaro (D-Fresh Meadows), who called the plan "a superb blueprint for making New York City cleaner, healthier and more sustainable over the next 25 years."

Bloomberg made it clear that New York City needed to do something to reduce traffic congestion. In the January announcement of the PlaNYC 2030 Initiative, Bloomberg said that without some government intercession, New Yorkers could be looking at a rush hour that is 16 hours a day in the not too distant future. His solution was to impose an \$8 fee on auto commuters entering Manhattan below 86th Street.

"As the city continues to grow, the costs of congestion – to our health, to our economy, and to our environment, are only going to get worse," Bloomberg said. "The question is not whether we want to pay, but how do we want to pay? With an increased asthma rate? With more greenhouse gases? Wasted time? Lost business? Higher prices? Or do we charge a modest fee to encourage more people to take mass transit?"

The \$8 Congestion Fee, which would begin with a three-year trial in 2009, was the part of the plan that took the most flack directly following the announcement.

"We must look at innovative ways to face the challenges created by the City's own success," said U.S. Rep. Anthony Weiner (D-Kew Gardens). "A regressive tax on working middle class families and small business owners shouldn't be one of them."

The Queens Chamber of Commerce and Borough President Helen Marshall came out against the tax as well, citing lack of transportation alternatives in places like Southeast Queens.

"Studies have shown that the highest concentration of auto commuters comes primarily from southeast Queens, where subways and efficient mass transit alternatives do not exist," Marshall said. "Let's face it; congestion pricing would place an unfair tax on the victims of poor public transportation."

Queens Chamber of Commerce President Raymond Irrera also spoke out.

"Congestion pricing is a regressive tax that harms small businesses and middle class residents who need to travel into Manhattan to work or conduct business," he said. "The plan, as proposed, would entail forcing people with little or no



Queens Borough President Helen Marshall joined the Queens Chamber of Commerce and City Council Members during a news conference at Bulova Corporate Center to speak out against proposal related to congestion pricing. Second from r. is Chamber president Ray Irrera.

access to public transportation onto a mass transit system that is already at capacity and would add significant costs to the price of doing business in New York City.”

In addition to concerns for citizens in poorly served areas, some opponents pointed to the fact that the MTA is overcrowded and underserved as it is, with almost all trains that cross between boroughs completely overloaded at peak hours.

Not everyone thought that the Congestion Tax was such a bad idea, however, with the New York Public Interest Research Group releasing a statement in support.

“NYPIRG agrees with Mayor Bloomberg’s support of congestion pricing for cars coming into Manhattan’s Central Business District at rush-hours,” a statement read. “Congestion pricing is one of the most effective ways to fund better subway and bus service, tame out-of-control traffic and give future generations cleaner air and a saner city.”

In spite of the Congestion pricing disagreement, many facets of the plan met with wholehearted approval. The Mayor’s commitment to increasing energy efficiency and to making New York the gold standard in terms of cities working against global warming were well received with community members and legislators alike.

Ultimately, the PlaNYC 2030 Initiative is all about conducting a discussion, and formulating a plan for New York City, and Mayor Bloomberg has evidently gotten that ball rolling. Now what comes out of the plan will depend largely on the willingness of the government and communities to compromise.