



Thursday, April 26, 2007

Queens pans congestion pricing plan

BY [PETE DAVIS](#)

Valente Yeast, a family-owned company with offices in Maspeth, has been distributing baking supplies throughout the city for nearly 100 years. Everyday, the company sends five or six trucks into Manhattan and throughout the city to make deliveries.

However, owner Dominic Valente said if a controversial congestion-pricing plan proposed by Mayor Michael Bloomberg goes through, it would add more than \$27,000 worth of annual expenses to his overhead, putting the future of his business in jeopardy.

“I can’t afford that,” Valente said. “I don’t know what’s going to happen.”

During an Earth Day speech, Bloomberg outlined 127 initiatives for the future of the city, but the one receiving the most attention as well as the most opposition citywide and specifically in Queens is a controversial congestion-pricing plan.

The plan, which Bloomberg originally greeted with hesitancy, involves charging cars \$8 and trucks \$21 to enter Manhattan south of 86th Street during the week from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m., in order to decrease congestion in the central business district as well as curtail environmental problems.

“As our city continues to grow, the cost 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, with more wasted time, lost business and higher prices. Or do we charge a modest fee to encourage more people to take mass transit.”

Bloomberg’s plan, which would credit the tolls drivers coming into Manhattan through the bridges and tunnels pay towards the \$8 and \$21 fees, create an exemption for taxis and not charge drivers for using the FDR or West Side Highway, is being met with strong opposition from many Queens politicians and business groups.

On Tuesday, April 24, the Queens Chamber of Commerce, which commissioned a study back in 2006 detailing the harmful effects congestion pricing would have on Queens small businesses, held a press conference with Queens Borough President Helen Marshall and representatives from the City Council to voice its opposition to Bloomberg’s proposal.

“Congestion pricing is a regressive tax that harms and could conceivably break the backs of small businesses and middle class residents that need to travel into Manhattan to conduct business,” said Queens Chamber President Raymond Irrera.

Marshall agreed, saying that Queens is already underserved by the lack of public transportation, and increased local bus service to reach subway lines, express bus service directly into Manhattan and ferry service from the Rockaways should be addressed before even considering the Mayor’s proposal.

“We need to upgrade the network to be more efficient,” Marshall said.

City Councilmember John Liu, who chairs the Council’s transportation committee, focused on the need for more express buses while keeping open the possibility of charging a fee if those needs were met.

“To the extent that further measures are needed to ease congestion, driver fees can be considered as with everything else being on the table,” he said. “Incentives must come before penalties, otherwise the talk of sustainability is nothing more than, at best a pipedream, and at worst empty campaign rhetoric.”

During his speech, Bloomberg talked about conducting a three-year pilot project and securing hundreds of millions of dollars in federal funding to implement the plan, which he estimated would raise \$400 million in its first year.

For the plan to take effect, it would require the approval of the State Legislature. Currently, representatives from the legislature have said they will consider the proposal, but have expressed initial concerns with the plan.

Bloomberg’s proposal is based on a similar congestion price model implemented in London in 2003, which officials say has drastically reduced congestion, and is supported by a number of environmental groups as well as the Partnership for New York City, a nonprofit group of 200 CEOs from the city’s top corporate, investment and entrepreneurial firms.

However, opponents of the plan say that the London model has had damaging effects on businesses, and the amount charged to enter London’s business district has doubled since originally implemented, which officials fear happening here too.