

Con: Congestion pricing not what it appears

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Too often, elected officials want a program so bad, they make unsupported claims. Sometimes, advocates really want some programs and sell out despite a rotten core inside the shiny apple. That convergence of forces combined with support from moneyed special interests and editorial boards, which failed to give more than a superficial look that might have almost imposed a congestion tax on us. Most of our elected officials in Queens and Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver and many of their colleagues looked more closely at this scheme.

When I organized a congestion pricing forum with City Council Finance Chairman David Weprin with City Council Finance Chairman David Weprin (7:30 p.m. Thursday, June 21, at Temple Sholom, 263-10 Union Turnpike) it appeared this issue needed no immediate attention. Mayor Mike and his special interest coalition poured at least \$3 million -- as business leader Kathy Wilde admitted -- to pressure legislators to approve a congestion tax -- essentially a backdoor way to impose East River Bridge tolls, on those who drive their cars and trucks into Manhattan south of 86th Street. The biggest exemptions cover taxis and black-car limos used by more wealthy folks.

Visit the tax supporters' Web site. They state: "Put simply, congestion pricing is the most powerful policy tool at the hands of city and state officials to reduce unnecessary driving, promote environmentally sound transportation and finance public transportation improvements while at the same time dramatically improving public health."

[source:<http://www.campaignfornewyork.org/factsheets/Congestion%20Pricing%20Talking%20Points.pdf>, page 1].

This tax gets packaged as an environmental initiative around a message that we must support the Mayor's 2030 PlaNYC or face public health impacts such as asthma, worse air pollution, global warming.

Let's look at the record:

- Greenhouse gases generated here by on-road vehicles declined by 5.6 percent between 1995 and 2005, while those generated by all other sources rose by 12.8 percent. The city scheme proposes no measures that address asthma where it impacts most: air pollution hot spots including The South Bronx, East Harlem, South Jamaica and Bedford-Stuyvesant.
- Congestion pricing is extraordinarily inefficient as a revenue raiser for mass transit. Proponents agree the scheme's annual operating costs would total \$240 million out of \$620 estimated gross revenues. People who live, work, do business in and visit New York would be paying \$2 of every \$5 million collected to the program and not on projects to improve mass transit and clean our air. Alternatively, Queens Civic Congress' innovative commuter tax would provide 100 percent it collects and double to triple the net revenue.
- About 31 percent of the 3.6 million daily Manhattan's central business district visitors -- and about 55 percent of all domestic business and leisure visitors to the city -- travel by car. Those from the four preferred boroughs have a median income under \$43,000. Alternative measures offer much greater traffic relief, including stationing more traffic agents to steer drivers away from blocking the box.

The public ought to know the truth about this scheme that offers no traffic relief and maintains pollution impacts where our most vulnerable New Yorkers -- asthma sufferers -- live.

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