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Editorial and Op-Ed

Congestion Pricing: Still an Accident Waiting to Happen by City Council Member David Weprin

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If a congestion pricing plan is implemented, thousands of New Yorkers will be forced to suffer a head-on collision with a tax that could cost them as much as \$2,000 a year. The damage would be even worse for small businesses that employ trucks to ship their products into Manhattan, as the suggested fee for them would be set at over \$5,000 a year. Regardless of what argument you hear out of the Bloomberg administration about the necessity of implementing congestion pricing, it is a tax; and it is a tax being levied on those who can least afford it during a time when the city is enjoying a \$5 billion surplus. Traffic congestion is a problem that needs to be addressed, but other alternatives should be studied before we punish commuters who live in the outer-boroughs.

Now the state has formed a commission to study the impacts of congestion on the citizens and businesses in our city. I applaud this effort as now a careful and considerate dialogue can take place to address this growing concern. Further, the MTA is now proposing raising fares on New York's buses and subways which is further convoluting the issue. It is my hope that this commission will take advantage of this opportunity and consider reasonable alternatives to the administration's current plan. Let me be very clear: Traffic congestion is a problem that is not going away by itself, but there are alternatives to the imposition of a regressive tax.

Commuters, small businesses and working class families, as well as other outer-borough neighborhoods who have very limited access to public transportation and have to rely on their cars to get into Manhattan, would unfairly suffer from a congestion tax. Many neighborhoods outside of Manhattan will be devastated by a congestion tax because it will leave people with the unenviable choice of either paying more money to get to work or traveling long distances to reach the few crowded forms of mass transit that are available to them. Working class people who cannot afford the excessive fee will be bumped off the streets and crowded onto ill-equipped buses and subways to free up the streets for the privileged few who can afford to pay the tax.

What I find equally disingenuous about the proposal is the argument that congestion pricing would be good for the environment. In fact, it does nothing to address the prevalence of background pollutants found with greater frequency in areas such as Long Island City, East Harlem, Bed Stuy, the South Bronx and Jamaica. Residents of these areas, particularly younger children, endure high rates of asthma, yet would see no relief from the proposed congestion pricing plan.

No one can ignore the fact that we do have a congestion problem but the idea of taxing the working class as the only means of reducing traffic is short-sighted. Traffic mitigation alternatives include more vigorous enforcement of existing traffic and parking rules, like cracking down on double and triple parked cars, preventing trucks from parking in loading zones once they have completed their deliveries, reducing non-emergency deliveries during the day and stopping taxis from middle of the street pick-ups and drop-offs. Improving traffic management, offering incentives to motorists and businesses to use mass transit, and improving the public transportation system—especially in the boroughs outside of Manhattan—will also reduce traffic without having to impose another tax.

Initiating a congestion traffic tax now is tantamount to putting the cart before the horse. Improvements to our mass transit system and exploring other avenues of relief are necessary first steps. The fact remains that no one disputes the need to reduce congestion in both Manhattan and the rest of the city, but there is nothing innovative about a congestion pricing plan because it is just another unfair tax with which we are all too familiar.

David Weprin is a Democrat representing parts of Queens on the City Council. He is chair of the Council Finance Committee.