



Staten Island Advance

A snub, by any measure

Thursday, August 23, 2007

STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE -- The major players in the city and the state designated to appoint a special commission to study the mayor's congestion-pricing plan and other traffic-reduction proposals have spoken. All 17 members of the commission chosen were announced on Tuesday.

All of the commission members have impressive career credentials, but none of them has the resume item that could matter much to residents of this borough as they consider the mayor's controversial plan.

Not one of the 17 has any connection to Staten Island. Not one of them lives here. Not one of them was elected by Staten Islanders. Not one of them represents a Staten Island-based organization. Nor are any of the panel members from the Bronx.

Gov. Eliot Spitzer had three selections on the commission. So did Mayor Michael Bloomberg and City Council Speaker Christine Quinn. So did Senate Majority Leader Joseph Bruno and Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver.

But among these five leaders who had the authority to choose 15 of the 17 members, not one saw fit to select a Staten Islander or Bronx resident.

How does that happen?

These are two of the five boroughs of the City of New York, the city which is undertaking this radical overhaul of traffic control, after all. Both boroughs, like the others, have an enormous stake in any traffic-mitigation plan that might ultimately be adopted. That fact alone should have given Staten Island and the Bronx automatic seats at the table.

We can't help but notice that the three other boroughs, as well as the nearby suburban counties upstate and on Long Island are duly represented on the panel, as you might expect. All the jurisdictions whose commuters will be affected by these drastic changes should be represented on the commission that will present final recommendations to be considered by the state Legislature and City Council.

Most were, except this borough and the Bronx. Didn't it occur to anyone involved in the selection process that this might be viewed an insult and even an injustice?

Forget about symbolism and hurt feelings. This might ultimately be viewed as a grave political miscalculation on the part of those who made the decision that it was OK to exclude this borough from the commission.

Remember, polls have shown that, the percentage of Staten Islanders opposed to congestion-pricing is among the highest of any borough. The strongest opposition among residents of the five boroughs was found in the Bronx.

The smart strategy would have been to make it a point to include at least one representative of

those boroughs in the commission's discussions in the hope of winning wider support.

Instead, the most powerful supporters of the plan, including the mayor, the governor, the Senate majority leader and the City Council speaker, all of whom favor congestion-pricing, chose to cater to other interests.

City Councilman James Oddo said, "What that has done is make a very difficult sell to the people of Staten Island nearly impossible...Can you imagine Manhattan not being represented?"

No we can't.

Again, we have no quarrel with most of the selections. Certainly, Metropolitan Transportation Authority Executive Director Elliot Sander belongs on the panel, as does Andrew Shorris, the executive director of the Port Authority, another agency that has a huge stake in regional transportation issues.

The same goes for city Department of Transportation Commissioner Janette Sadik-Kahn, former First Deputy Mayor Marc Shaw, Gene Russianoff, from the New York Public Interest Research Group and the Straphangers Campaign, and Environmental Defense New York Regional Director Andy Darrell. Nor do we have any problem with Richard Brodsky, the powerful Westchester assemblyman and an outspoken opponent of congestion-pricing or Partnership for New York City President and CEO Kathryn Wylde.

But the qualifications of some of the other appointees are debatable. Several have only the most tangential experience with transportation and environmental issues and seem to have been appointed to appease certain constituencies rather than on the basis of any practical expertise.

Might not Mr. Oddo, City Councilman Michael McMahon, state Sen. Andrew Lanza, Assemblyman Vincent Ignizio or Chamber of Commerce President and CEO Linda Baran, all of whom have been immersed in transportation issues, have been better suited to the task?

To be clear (and fair): No one official made all the appointments and no single official had more than three. So no single official is to blame. Still, there were 17 appointments; not one official saw a need to appoint a Staten Islander.

The cumulative effect of this is that two boroughs with tens of thousands of commuters who will be affected by any changes imposed on the basis of this panel's recommendations won't be represented. In our book, that's an inexcusable snub and dumb politics.