

Critiquing Some Congestion Pricing Impacts

This August 26, 2007 New York Times report highlights that New Yorkers from Brooklyn, Queens, Staten Island and The Bronx will get “hit with the biggest burden, because congestion pricing fees will amount to a de facto toll.” Also, a top city official admits: “The impact on people in the suburbs will be very modest.” Later the article notes, “the money generated from congestion pricing will take years to collect and spend.” and forecasts the prospects of “crippling traffic jams, overcrowded trains and buses and a shortage of parking spaces at stations” as any new riders board “trains and buses already running at capacity.” New Yorkers deserves answers to why congestion tax proponents want to perpetrate such a flawed scheme when other alternative prove more practical and make more sense.

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ON COMMUTING:

How Congestion Pricing Could Play Out

By KEN BELSON

COMMUTING to Manhattan by car has long meant enduring mind-numbing traffic and paying more and more for tolls, parking and gas. So in April, when Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg proposed charging cars \$8 to enter Manhattan below 86th Street on weekdays, suburban drivers had reason to groan yet again.

But the plan, which is likely to be revised during negotiations with lawmakers in Albany next year, may turn out to be a net benefit for commuters who drive into Manhattan or take mass transit. That’s because the city’s plan appears focused on reducing the number of cars that come into the city and on raising billions of dollars to improve mass transit.

In fact, drivers who live in the outer boroughs of New York and use the free East River bridges — the Brooklyn, Manhattan, Williamsburg and Queensboro — to commute into Manhattan may be hit with the biggest burden, because congestion pricing fees will amount to a de facto toll.

“The impact on people in the suburbs will be very modest,” said Daniel L. Doctoroff, the deputy mayor for economic development. “We don’t want to have toll shopping, which produces a surprising amount of congestion,” he added, referring to drivers who go out of their way to take free bridges and clog local streets in Brooklyn, Queens and Manhattan.

By contrast, drivers from the suburbs will be able to deduct tolls from their \$8 fee, shrinking it by as much as \$6 for those who use the Hudson River crossings — the Holland and Lincoln Tunnels and the George Washington Bridge. Transportation analysts say, however, that even though the additional \$2 can certainly add up, it will not be enough to persuade drivers to abandon their cars en masse.

Transportation officials are also confident that the number of drivers who switch to mass transit will be minimal because most commuters coming into Manhattan from Long Island, Westchester and Connecticut already take public transportation. According to a survey by Metro-North Railroad, 89 percent of Manhattan-bound commuters who live along the Hudson Line north of Croton-Harmon take the train, and for commuters who live along the Harlem Line, 81 percent take the train. On Long Island, close to 90 percent of those who commute into the city use the railroad.

If the Long Island Rail Road adds a third track between Floral Park and Hicksville, as it plans, there will also be more trains to carry city residents to jobs on Long Island during the morning rush hours, distributing traffic more evenly.

Even those who continue to drive into Manhattan once the plan is in place will benefit if it does what it is supposed to do — reduce traffic by 6.3 percent in the zone.

At the same time, some of the \$380 million the city expects to raise in the first year of congestion pricing will go to improving mass transit, including building express bus lanes and paying for new train tunnels under the East and Hudson Rivers that will increase capacity on the Long Island Rail Road and New Jersey Transit.

“If we assume that congestion pricing works, it tells the rest of the region to look at their development needs,” said Robert E. Paaswell, the executive director of the University Transportation Research Center at the City College of New York.

Still, the money generated from congestion pricing will take years to collect and spend. In the meantime, suburban commuters face crippling traffic jams, overcrowded trains and buses and a shortage of parking spaces at stations. So any new riders might be getting on trains and buses already running at capacity.

“We have a crowding problem, and we can’t expect to handle an increase in ridership because we’re not adding more trains until 2009 or 2010,” said Jim Cameron, the chairman of the Connecticut Metro-North New Haven Rail Commuter Council.

Mr. Cameron said that 15 percent of Metro-North trains are out of service every day, and Connecticut residents must wait an average of four years to get reserved parking spots at stations on the New Haven Line. There are similarly chronic shortages in New Jersey, Westchester and Long Island. At the Princeton Junction station in West Windsor, there are 3,560 spots to accommodate 7,080 daily riders.

Federal transportation officials this month promised to chip in \$354 million to improve mass transit in the New York area if the city meets certain criteria. But most of the money is earmarked for projects within the five boroughs, including \$214 million for bus depots in Queens and Staten Island. Far less is dedicated to solving transportation bottlenecks in the suburbs.

That means commuters will have to wait for existing projects to be completed. For instance, New Jersey Transit and other agencies are building a second rail tunnel under the Hudson to double the number of trains — New Jersey Transit’s own and Amtrak’s — into Penn Station. The \$7.5 billion tunnel is not expected to be opened until 2016.

Before then, the city’s congestion pricing plan — which, pending approval in Albany, is expected to go into effect on a trial basis by March 2009 — will add 28,000 trips a day on New Jersey Transit buses, trains and light-rail cars, according to forecasts by the state’s Department of Transportation. “The bus service is already at capacity, so to add 50 or 60 more buses would be difficult,” said Kris Kolluri, New Jersey’s transportation commissioner. “To accommodate this surge in ridership could be a challenge.”

New Jersey Transit and the state's Department of Transportation have added nearly 15,000 parking spots at train, bus and light-rail stations since 2002 and expect to build an additional 3,700 in the next three years to keep up with ridership, which has hit records the past several years.

Mr. Kolluri and transportation officials elsewhere say that more spaces could be added, but that many towns are unwilling to accept them because they fear an increase in traffic — the same problem that has led Mr. Bloomberg to pursue congestion pricing so vigorously.