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Point of View: *What's wrong with congestion pricing*

By Jeffrey Dinowitz

When Mayor Michael Bloomberg put forth his congestion pricing proposal my initial reaction was positive. How could anyone be against a plan that would reduce traffic and pollution? It was only when I started to examine its details that I realized its many problems. I raised a number of issues with the mayor's staff and with advocates of the plan. At no time was I given satisfactory responses to my concerns, nor have I seen any effort on the part of the mayor to address some of these very serious issues.

I have been very troubled by the efforts of the mayor and supporters of congestion pricing to ram it through with as little discussion as possible. Something which involves such an important change in the way New York operates should have been brought up much earlier than nine or 10 weeks before the end of the legislative session.

In addition, I was outraged by those who insisted that the Legislature should pass congestion pricing by July 16 so that we can get up to \$500 million in federal funding. We shouldn't pass legislation with a gun held to our heads. As it turned out, the July 16 threat was a lie. Congestion pricing wasn't passed by July 16, yet, federal funding will still be available if we pass it at a later date.

If one of the goals of congestion pricing is to encourage mass transit use, then I believe that mass transit must be improved and made more appealing before congestion pricing would take effect. Currently, if I were to travel from my home to the City Hall area, it would take me about half an hour (not during rush hour) by car. It would take an hour and 15 minutes to an hour and a half by public transportation - each way. That's up to two hours extra, a lot of time to waste. I would love to see major improvements in bus service.

The MTA has proposed a long list of improvements and service additions in anticipation of congestion pricing, yet not one of these improvements affects the western half of the Bronx. In addition, the MTA recently stated that several subway lines, including our IRT No. 1 line, are already operating at capacity and cannot handle additional passengers. So, what exactly are the improvements for mass transit that we are going to see in the West Bronx to make it more practical for people to leave their cars home? I could not even consider supporting congestion pricing without significant improvements in mass transit.

The mayor has proposed deducting bridge tolls from the \$8 congestion pricing fee. Sounds good. But not only is that unfair, it is a deal-breaker for me. Most Bronxites pay no toll into Manhattan. Some people from Riverdale pay the \$2 Henry Hudson Bridge toll. New Jerseyites, on the other hand, pay from \$4 to \$6 to cross the George Washington Bridge. That means that while most Bronx residents would pay the full \$8 to drive below 86th Street, residents of New Jersey would pay only \$2 to \$4. That's outrageous, unfair, unacceptable and, in fact, a form of discrimination against most New York City residents.

The expensive advertising campaign conducted by proponents of congestion pricing suggested that asthma rates of children would go down under this plan. Maybe that's true for children who live in Midtown Manhattan, but it would not be true for the areas that surround the congestion zone. It wouldn't be true for any of the neighborhoods where traffic might increase and where drivers might park their cars to avoid paying the \$8. Traffic would likely increase in Riverdale because fewer people would avoid the parkway (since the toll would be deducted from the \$8.) I assume proponents of the plan believe keeping asthma rates and pollution down is as important to my constituents as it is to the children who live in Midtown.

A significant percentage of vehicular traffic would be exempted from the plan. Taxis and car services would be exempted, for example. Tackling the terrible congestion problems caused by double parking by trucks, taxis picking up or letting people off in the middle of the street, bicyclists driving the wrong way or ignoring the traffic rules they're required to follow aren't addressed in the plan.

Thanks in large part to the leadership of Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver, instead of rushing into passing a faulty plan or totally missing out on the possibility of federal funding, the Legislature created a commission to examine congestion pricing and come up with a plan by next March. Unfortunately, the commission, whose members are appointed by the mayor, governor, council speaker and the four state legislative leaders, appears stacked in favor of one side of the argument, putting into question its ability to be fair. The 17 members consist mostly of Manhattan residents and, it appears, no residents of the Bronx or Staten Island.

I applaud the mayor for attempting to take bold steps to improve the environment, but I deplore the efforts by proponents to steamroll a plan that may have a good intent but has many problems which must be overcome. While I am very open to taking major steps to reduce traffic in Manhattan and throughout the city and am not totally closed to a different form of congestion pricing, if I had to vote on this plan today as presented I would vote "no."

Jeffrey Dinowitz is the assemblyman for the 81st District.