

Editorial Comment: Congestion pricing isn't a plan

City Hall wants to charge drivers to go to Manhattan without asking why they use their cars, or how to change the conditions that impel them to.

It takes about 30 minutes to drive from Riverdale, Kingsbridge or Van Cortlandt Village to Manhattan's central business district, and close to an hour to get there by express bus or subway. A Metro-North train takes just 25 minutes to Grand Central Station, but most riders have to add time on each end to get to and from the station.

Now, Mayor Bloomberg, can you understand why 45 percent of local commuters get to work by car, and why the mood of most of the 100 or so who attended Assemblyman Jeffrey Dinowitz's forum on congestion pricing at Riverdale Temple last week ranged from uneasy to angry at your proposal to impose an \$8 charge on drivers who travel below 86th Street between 6 a.m. and 6 p.m.?

But there's worse to come. The impact of the mayor's proposal will fall at least as heavily on local residents who don't drive to Manhattan, as on those who do. For, as it's currently structured, congestion pricing will make the most heavily-traveled artery in Riverdale more congested, not less.

The MTA intends to eventually ratchet-up the toll on the Henry Hudson Bridge to \$5. But Mr. Bloomberg proposes deducting the cost of the toll from the congestion price, so that the cost of driving to Manhattan would remain \$8, whether you took the Broadway Bridge, the Major Deegan Expressway or the parkway. Under the mayor's plan, the parkway is also to be used as a free bypass for drivers bound for destinations outside the congestion zone.

Taken together, these proposals would provide an incentive to those who persist in driving to take the Henry Hudson Parkway.

Now, add the city Department of Transportation's proposal to permit small trucks and other commercial vehicles on the parkway in Manhattan. What you get is more traffic, more backups and a permanently clogged, heavily-polluted roadway through the heart of Riverdale.

Yes, the private car is a major contributor to air pollution and global warming; but City Hall's Manhattan-centric approach is all stick and no carrot. It doesn't address the flaws that lead people to forsake public transportation.

Mr. Bloomberg says the revenue from the congestion fee will be dedicated to improving mass transit. A look at the similar promise to use the proceeds from the state lottery to improve education shows how unreliable such commitments can be. And, in any event, none of City Hall's ideas for improvement extend to the West Bronx.

In urging members and friends of the Henry Hudson Parkway Task Force to attend last week's forum, task force founder Hilary Kitasei outlined some of the steps that could make the effort to reduce

reliance on the automobile less onerous and more successful. The Hudson River Greenway "has the potential to become as serious a biking/pedestrian route as its downtown counterpart, especially if it links to other transit nodes," she wrote.

"Ferry service up and down the Hudson River as well as across to New Jersey is gaining viability. There are many suggestions for making Amtrak and Metro-North trains more flexible and accessible for short distances.

"In short," she concluded, "there is an arsenal of tools which, if well-crafted and synchronized, can conceivably accomplish the ideal: moving more people while leaving a smaller carbon footprint."

Yet you will look in vain in City Hall's plans for any sense of urgency about creating the Bronx portion of the Hudson River Greenway, let alone a plan for forging the crucial link between its Bronx and Manhattan sections.

You may ask, as Ms. Kitasei does, "Why, when the Henry Hudson Parkway is so important, does the city resist the opportunity to develop a corridor management plan for the parkway? Especially one that will make it eligible for federal funding as a Scenic Byway?"

And you will surely wonder when City Hall will recognize that a key to getting people out of their cars is reliable, comfortable, fast and inexpensive mass transit.

Ferries would be attractive to Riverdalians, particularly those who work in lower Manhattan. We need faster, less crowded, subways. Because the MTA seeks to serve riders in Inwood, Spuyten Duyvil and Riverdale north of the Monument on a single route, the express bus makes time-consuming detours. We need dedicated lines for each neighborhood, instead.

But ferries are a mere gleam in the municipal eye; speedier subway and bus service are not even being thought of; and despite ample evidence that low fares attract riders, it is nearly certain that we'll be socked with a hefty fare increase in the coming months.

Lack of planning got us into this mess. In thrall to the real estate barons, politicians and the city's planning bureaucracy have permitted Manhattan to be grotesquely overbuilt. That's what's so burdened its streets.

Now they want Riverdale and communities like it to pay for that folly.