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By Rail or Road, Travel Costs Rising in New York Region

By [KEN BELSON](#) and [WILLIAM NEUMAN](#)

The agencies that operate the buses, trains, tunnels and bridges that spill commuters into Manhattan are in the midst of one of the biggest and most sustained rounds of fare and toll increases in decades.

The increases — some of which will doubly hit commuters who, for instance, take a commuter train and the subway — are aimed at expanding the transportation network to keep up with record ridership and shoring up the agencies' shaky finances.

In the past year, customers of the city's yellow cabs and [New Jersey Transit](#) trains, buses and light rail lines have been asked to pay more.

And next month, the [Metropolitan Transportation Authority](#) board will vote on whether to raise tolls and fares on its subways, buses, commuter rail lines, bridges and tunnels by an average of 6.5 percent.

Now the [Port Authority of New York and New Jersey](#) is hoping to raise tolls by at least a third on its Hudson River crossings early next year — the first increase since 2001, transportation officials said yesterday.

The plan was expected to be introduced at a board meeting in two weeks, according to The Star-Ledger of Newark — after statewide legislative elections in New Jersey. Drivers using the George Washington Bridge and Lincoln and Holland Tunnels would pay \$8 or \$9 in cash, up from \$6. Drivers with E-ZPass would face an increase from the current \$5 during peak periods and \$4 during other times.

PATH train fares, currently \$1.50, would also go up.

While there have been sporadic toll and fare increases in the last 20 years, such a confluence in a relatively short time is rare.

With the region's trains, buses and highways sagging under the weight of millions of new riders, transportation officials are pushing ahead with ambitious expansion plans like a new rail tunnel under the Hudson River and the large Metropolitan Transportation Authority construction projects already under way, including the Second Avenue Subway and a Long Island Rail Road link to Grand Central Terminal.

Elected officials, usually reluctant to have fares and tolls increased on their watch, may believe that they have some political cover because many voters who commute are frustrated with the overburdened transit system and the rising risk of a calamity like the one in Minnesota this summer, when a major Mississippi River bridge collapsed.

“It’s easy for politicians to put this off, but we’re getting to the point where the agencies that can raise their tolls and fares are doing it out of desperation,” said Jeffrey Zupan, a senior fellow at the [Regional Plan Association](#). “It’s desperation caused by growth, not because we’re going down the tubes.”

While the timing of the increases has seemingly not been coordinated, Mr. Zupan said, one agency’s rate increase provides cover for others. Still, many drivers and elected officials are unlikely to take the sharp increases quietly.

"Hitting commuters with higher tolls is simply unacceptable," said a state senator in New Jersey, Ellen Karcher, a Democrat who is locked in a tight race in Monmouth and Mercer Counties. “Drivers are already being slammed with skyrocketing gas prices, and they can’t shoulder the additional burden of paying \$2 more a day on tolls.”

The current round of price increases presents a dilemma for Mayor [Michael R. Bloomberg](#), who has proposed a congestion-pricing plan in which drivers would pay \$8 to enter central Manhattan, with the revenue helping to pay for new subways, commuter rail lines and other projects.

The plan must be approved by the State Legislature, many of whose members have raised strong objections. The Legislature has established a commission to recommend by January how best to reduce traffic in the city.

Assuming the mayor’s plan is approved in its current form, drivers who pay \$8 to enter central Manhattan would be able to deduct the cost of tolls for bridges and tunnels.

That means drivers entering the city from New Jersey could deduct the \$6 toll for crossing the Port Authority’s bridges and tunnels. But by raising its tolls to \$8, the Port Authority may end up taking the \$2 that could have gone to the city.

If congestion pricing existed today, drivers using most of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority’s bridges and tunnels, including the Triboro Bridge and the Queens-Midtown Tunnel, would be spared any additional expense from it, because the toll for E-ZPass users, who make up about 75 percent of drivers in the region, is already \$4 each way at most of its crossings.

While the Port Authority’s toll increase could siphon off tens of millions of dollars in potential revenue for the city from congestion pricing, one city official said it would ultimately meet the mayor’s goal of reducing traffic while helping to finance other major transportation initiatives.

“Raising tolls on Hudson River crossings will reduce the number of cars coming into Manhattan, increase revenue for New Jersey Transit and provide funding for Port Authority projects that were envisioned as being eligible for congestion pricing funds,” said John Gallagher, a spokesman for Mayor Bloomberg. “The plan certainly seems to meet with our objectives of more money for transit and fewer cars.”

Some opponents of the mayor's plan fear that rate increases by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority and the Port Authority could lead to higher congestion- pricing fees in the city, setting off a fresh cycle of increases.

Walter McCaffrey, a former City Council member from Queens who is a strong opponent of congestion pricing, said that the proposed toll increase would eat away at the plan's revenue, and eventually lead to an increase in the congestion charge above the \$8 proposed by the mayor.

"It would necessitate, for revenues to be generated for mass transit, the dramatic increase in the charge," Mr. McCaffrey said of the congestion fee.

In the face of concern and consternation by commuters and some elected officials, Robert Paaswell, the executive director of the University Transportation Research Center at [City College of New York](#), said the convergence of toll and fare increases must be viewed in the context of other price increases including gasoline, electrical power and food.

"There's this hysteria over fare increases and yet when I tell everybody the price of my bagel at Fairway went up from four for a dollar to three for a dollar, nobody in the newspaper is writing about my bagel cost going up," he said.

Jeremy Peters contributed reporting from Trenton.