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In Praise of Congestion

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In recent weeks I have spent a lot of time thinking about the reasons that I, and many others, occasionally drive into Manhattan, causing all this awful congestion that we hear so much about. My conclusion is that Mayor Bloomberg and other supporters of a congestion tax should be careful for what they wish. We may be a lot better off with congestion than without it.

Suffice it to say that when I do drive into Manhattan it is not to take a joyride to pass the time. Every time I drive into the "Congestion Zone" I am doing so for one reason — to engage in commerce. In other words, I am usually on a mission to spend money, bringing dollars to pump into Gotham's economy.

I suspect that most of those in the other cars I encounter on these trips to Manhattan are engaged in similar pursuits. From where I live, in Riverdale, I find that driving is usually the quickest and easiest way to get to many Manhattan destinations. My most valuable commodity is time, and on the occasions I drive into Manhattan during the peak hours, a few times a month, I am willing not only to put up with "congestion," but to pay for the privilege.

I am already paying a hefty toll to cross the Henry Hudson Bridge, the most expensive crossing in the city when measured in terms of cost per linear foot.

I feed meters, always keeping a supply of quarters at the ready. Recently the parking fees in the areas around Zabar's, Fairway, and Citarella, on the Upper West Side, places in which I often leave significant sums, have been raised through the introduction of "muni-meters." I used to be able to buy an hour's worth of parking by depositing \$1.50 in quarters into the meter. With the new devices the hourly fee has been raised to \$2. I may not be happy, but I pay it anyway. Some places I drive to are not quite as car-friendly. In those cases, I have to put my car in a parking garage. Recently I attended a meeting in midtown and paid \$55 to park my car for two hours. When I was done, I was back at my office near the Yonkers city line in little more than 20 minutes, congestion and all. Had I taken public transportation, it would have taken me at least an hour-and-a-half, given a best-case scenario.

I'm not sure that the extra eight bucks will convince me to change my habits, but the theory of congestion pricing is that it will — or some future increase will convince me and others to stop driving to Manhattan. Will I take mass transit and lug my extra virgin olive oil and balsamic vinegar home by train? Not likely.

I might well decide that I'm better off doing my shopping in Westchester. There is nothing there now as good as I find on the Upper West Side, but perhaps the demand caused by those who throw up their hands over what will surely be an ever-increasing congestion tax will convince Mr. Zabar that Scarsdale would be a nifty place to open a branch of his magnificent market.

We have had a number of good years here in New York, and have a booming economy. But changes in the tax code, or economic woes beyond our control could derail that success. Meanwhile tourism seems to be leveling off. Is it really smart to impede commerce among those of us who can point their cars in any direction?

It's time for honesty on the part of the administration. This isn't about ending congestion, because if that happens, our economy is dead in the water. This is nothing more than a back door way to impose tolls on the historically free Harlem and East River bridges.

Even the most optimistic estimates for the relief of "congestion" hover around a mere 6% decrease in cars entering Manhattan, which, it seems to me, will be hardly noticeable. There will be virtually no improvement in mass transit that to accommodate extra riders. The Daily News suggested last week that after expenses there will hardly be any extra funds generated by the Bloomberg scheme to improve subways and buses.

The mayor uses images of children suffering from asthma to promote his scheme. Those children don't live in the areas that will supposedly "benefit" from his scheme. They do live in areas of the Bronx that could experience increases in congestion — and presumably asthma rates — as drivers and truckers seek to avoid the tax by using roads such as the Major Deegan, the Bruckner and the Cross Bronx to avoid the congestion levy. What this scheme will do is diminish through taxation our right to drive into Manhattan to conduct our own personal business. Perhaps a doctor's appointment, or a weekday matinee at a Broadway theatre, or an important business meeting. These are things that help the city and its economy. Congestion and density is what defines us as a city. Let us enjoy it.

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