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Congestion pricing: tough to chew

By Thomas Tracy

Don't bite into the city's congestion pricing plan without knowing all the facts.

That was the warning that Corey Bearak, longtime opponent of the plan and policy advisor for the group Keep NYC Congestion Tax Free, imparted to members of Community Board 2 last week during a thorough informational session sponsored by the city's Department of Transportation (DOT).

As a New York City Traffic Mitigation Commission continues to hold public hearings and weigh the merits of Mayor Bloomberg's bold initiative to charge cars and trucks going into Midtown Manhattan, the DOT has been visiting community boards throughout the city, explaining how the plan will benefit the city's air, as well as its pocketbook.

Bloomberg is seeking the state's and city's approval to begin a \$354.5 million federally funded pilot program that promises to fight traffic gridlock, as well as abate the smog belching from these vehicles. The plan encourages motorists against driving into the city by charging them a fee to drive into Manhattan south of 86th Street weekdays between 6 a.m. and 6 p.m. Those driving on the FDR Drive or the West Side Highway intending to go to other boroughs will not be affected.



Corey Bearak, policy advisor for the group Keep NYC Congestion Tax Free, warned board members against agreeing to the congestion pricing plan too quickly.

The city intends to charge \$8 for cars and \$21 for trucks, officials said. Buses and taxi cabs do not have to pay the charge.

Armed with a power point presentation, DOT Office of Strategic Planning Senior Project Manager Nina Haiman said that the plan is not geared solely towards charging motorists.

The plan also calls for increasing public transportation to 22 underserved neighborhoods.

“We believe that we will be ready for the additional riders,” she told the board.

In order to handle the additional straphangers the plan will undoubtedly create, the city's congestion pricing plan will increase and improve transit service by installing bus and high occupancy vehicle (HOV) lanes for both the Williamsburg and Manhattan bridges as well as a new East River ferry to Midtown and Downtown Manhattan.

“Congestion pricing will result in less traffic and shorter commute times,” Haiman explained. “It will also finally provide funds for major transit improvements that have been talked about for years.”

If the pilot program is a success and the city opts to adopt congestion pricing, the city will be earning an additional \$380 million a year that New York can “bond off of” and invest in its own future, Haiman said. The plan is expected to generate nearly \$700 million a year, but will cost about \$300 million to operate.

But, as he turned the presentation into a small debate, Bearak warned board members not to fall for the city’s plan too quickly.

“Their premise is that the city is going to grow and that’s a good thing,” Bearak said, adding that digesting the plan is like eating a mango.

“Eating slices of it is fine,” he said. “But if you bite into the whole thing, you are going to break your teeth on the hard pit in the center.”

Questioning some of the plan’s findings, Bearak said that there are many traffic mitigation alternatives the city could adopt without having to force motorists to pay a fee to drive into Manhattan.

As it stands, he said, the plan would disproportionately hit the pockets of middle class and working New Yorkers, while shifting traffic and pollution to neighborhoods outside of Midtown Manhattan, he explained.

The city’s congestion pricing plan was fashioned after a similar plan in London, which showed some success.

But whatever successes the London plan showed only occurred because all public works projects in that city were halted for the first year of their congestion pricing plan was implemented, Bearak said.

Today, the benefits of congestion pricing can’t be seen on London’s streets, noted one community board member who just returned from a trip there.

“I was in London at 1 p.m. in the afternoon and it was bumper to bumper traffic,” the board member described.

“We’re not going to get rid of traffic all together,” Haiman remarked, adding that Bearak’s alternatives may compliment the city’s congestion pricing plan, but never act as a substitute to reach all of New York’s traffic mitigation goals.

“Our ultimate goal is to encourage everyone to use public transportation,” she said.

As this paper was going to press, the Traffic Mitigation Commission had already held their Brooklyn public hearing.

They were expected to release their preliminary findings by early January. Their finalized recommendations will be by the end of the month.

The city and state are expected to vote on the commission’s proposals in March.

Robert Perris, Community Board 2’s District Manager said that while it is not on the agenda, the board’s transportation committee may discuss what they learned at the congestion pricing presentation and prepare a resolution for the whole board to vote on.