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New spin on congestion pricing plan?

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New York City's plan to charge motorists in Manhattan faces so many roadblocks on so many fronts that critics seem increasingly assured of its demise.

But before this drama ends, you may see an old idea revived in a new form: first-ever tolls on vehicles crossing the East River bridges.

The city's "congestion pricing" proposal, as engineered by departing Deputy Mayor Dan Doctoroff, takes a beating in popularity polls. Questions persist over its costs, projected income, exemptions, parking impact, and privacy concerns related to its hundreds of required camera.

Proponents are scrambling to make the plan workable. One major change under consideration would shrink the pay-to-drive zone for the first-ever fee of up to \$8. The northern border could be drawn at 60th Street rather than 86th Street as first proposed.

"Lipstick on a pig," snipes Assemb. Richard Brodsky (D-Westchester), a member of the state commission created to study Mayor Michael Bloomberg's proposal. "Twenty-six less blocks of a bad idea is still a bad idea."

"The mayor's plan is collapsing -- on the merits and on the politics," Brodsky said. "On the merits, because they don't have the ability to do mass-transit improvements up front, they haven't solved the neighborhood impact problems, they haven't solved the fundamental fairness problems of charging access to public streets. On the politics, even some people who support the concept of congestion pricing are not supporting or unable to support the mayor's plan."

Others back that assessment. "The fact that they're now trying to jury-rig the proposal suggests that they recognize that it is not going anywhere," says Walter McCaffrey, a private consultant who represents the group "Keep New York City Congestion Tax Free." As McCaffrey notes, you cannot expect GOP senators from Long Island, whose fate could determine a majority in that house, to vote next year for a new tax on constituents.

Budget expert Marc Shaw, the commission chairman, was Bloomberg's top deputy mayor, and before that executive director of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority. He notes that the 17-member panel was created in part to suggest relevant changes. Its final report is due Jan. 31.

The commission is discussing those East River spans -- the Queensboro, Williamsburg, Brooklyn and Manhattan bridges -- as possible electronic collection points for the congestion pricing fees, he said. That could cut overhead costs and trim the number of cameras needed in the pay zone.

Proposals for East River bridge tolls were floated, and quickly torpedoed, in the early 1980s, the early 1990s -- and again in 2002 when Bloomberg and Shaw first took office and faced a huge city budget deficit. This time, the proceeds are proposed for mass transit. One question might be whether drivers could avoid a toll by skirting the pay zone once in Manhattan.

As he did several weeks ago at a commission hearing in Hempstead, Shaw speaks frankly about the fiscal goal of congestion pricing.

"There are two ways to reduce congestion," he said Thursday. "Either have fewer people going to work -- which is not something anyone in the political arena seems interested in -- or find more productive ways to get people to work. That means mass transit, and finding a source of revenue for the MTA capital program."

As Doctoroff departs, he leaves a legacy of complicated projects that ran aground -- the 2012 Olympics bid, the airport-Ground Zero land swap and the West Side Stadium.

If opponents on Long Island and in the five boroughs and the northern suburbs have their way, congestion pricing will soon join that list.

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