

The firms that expressed interest in contracts to build the City's congestion tax scheme raise a host of problems with the scheme in their own documents.

(Note the items bolded for emphasis below.)

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Runnin' Scared

Congestion Pricing Questions

Who's skeptical about the mayor's traffic plan? The companies bidding to run it.

by **Graham Rayman**

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Buried in a thousand pages of consultants' pitches for the Bloomberg congestion-pricing gold mine, someone finally gets to the heart of the matter.

The mayor's people say that traffic in Manhattan's central business zone can be reduced by 6.3 percent if commuters are charged \$8 to drive to work, and \$4 for driving within the zone. **But the folks from Consulting Stream, one of 30 potential bidders, suggest that \$8 just isn't steep enough to force enough people to stop driving their cars to Manhattan. Coming from a company involved in London's highly touted traffic-reduction program, which charges about \$16, that view probably shouldn't be dismissed out of hand.**

"The rationale for the EZ-Pass customer to switch transport modes does not seem to be substantial," the consultant says.

The people at Skymeter, another potential bidder, go even further: They call the goal to reduce traffic by 6.3 percent "unambitious." It will, they say, "do little to ease congestion in NYC." And any potential gain, they add, will be erased in a few years by population growth. "The goal needs to be at least twice that in order to meaningfully impact bus congestion, bicycle and pedestrian safety and air quality," the officials write.

Backers of the plan tout the money it will raise for mass transit. But **Accenture, another potential bidder, cautions that in the end, trip times must actually decrease; otherwise, people will see the charge as just another tax. Other bidders say the mayor's plan is too expensive and too complicated to execute by the 2009 deadline.**

All this stuff is relevant now because at the end of the month, the government panel chosen to mull the plan over is supposed to make its recommendation to the state legislature and the City Council. In a meeting last Thursday, the politically polyglot panel maintained a sense of delicate

civility for about 90 minutes.

And then, inevitably, the thing fractured. It started, of course, with Richard Brodsky, the Democratic assemblyman from Westchester, prodding commission chair Marc Shaw, the former Giuliani and Bloomberg aide. "The mayor's plan is fundamentally unfair," Brodsky declared.

The talk in the meeting till that point had centered on how the plan to tax people who drive into Manhattan during the week would benefit a downstate mass-transit system jonesing for long-term money. But Brodsky wanted to point out that in Albany, you have to give to get. "Anyone who thinks all this money is just going to the MTA is dreaming," he said. "You have to deal with the upstate problems too. Anything that doesn't will fail the Albany test, and you know it." Brodsky then did two things: First, he suggested that the city's businesses don't contribute to mass transit.

That caused Kathryn Wylde, the Partnership for New York City head who represents business, to hit the roof. "The business tax here is 50 percent," she said, gesturing. "Five-O."

Undeterred, Brodsky then floated his own notion about a tax on carbon emissions—basically everything that runs on power.

"It will shut down the economy of New York!" Wylde declared.

Elizabeth Yeampierre, a civil-rights lawyer and activist from Brooklyn, then accused Brodsky, more or less, of trying to protect his own constituents from a commuter tax. "Is this what it is—everyone's own agenda?"

An almost plaintive cry followed from Nassau County Chamber of Commerce president Richard Bivone. "Aren't we taxing ourselves to death?" he wondered. "I mean, at every level?"

Gene Russianoff, the leading transit advocate, turned on his microphone and opined that he never saw a tax benefiting mass transit that he didn't like. The mayor's transportation commissioner, Janette Sadik-Khan, then objected to the use of the word tax: "This is not a tax commission," she pointed out.

The big news at the meeting seemed to be that charging tolls on the East River bridges was a dead issue, but that sharply reducing the number of cameras used in the plan would be one way to cut costs. Under this idea, a cordon of cameras would be set up only at the entry points to the congestion-pricing zone and along 60th Street, and not on streets within the zone. Good thing, too, because many of the potential bidders noted the cost and complexity of the required technology as major problems. The flow charts alone are totally incomprehensible.

IBM, which was involved in Stockholm's traffic-tax program, says the mayor's plan is so complex that it will be extremely difficult to meet the 2009 deadline. The \$4 fee for people motoring inside the zone would be "prohibitively expensive and impractical," IBM says, because the city would have to set up a camera at every intersection in the zone. And allowing motorists to use the FDR and the West Side Highway without charge adds serious complexity to the plan.

The consultants from Hopstop, a firm that provides online transit info, say the result would be overcrowded transit lines and more delays. And they wonder what will be done for city dwellers who can't afford to drive into Manhattan any more but don't have a convenient mass-transit option.

Despite claims to the contrary from the city, the people from Consulting Stream also say that the neighborhoods near transit hubs and on the borders of the zone will be choked with motorists looking for a parking spot. As a result, they say, the city will have to charge steeper parking fees or issue neighborhood permits—another politically touchy proposal. One can easily imagine people trying to duck the fee by claiming residency in Manhattan.

The mayor's plan would charge trucks \$21 and cars \$8, but bidder Consystec says that a system charging by vehicle weight would be tricky and expensive to install. Plus, Bloomberg also wants to exempt certain vehicles, which can be done via EZ-Pass, but the plan would still require inspectors to eyeball the cars and make sure that they are, in fact, exempt.

The consultants also cite a range of technical problems that would crop up with the cameras. People will vandalize them. Motorists can duck them by tailgating or switching lanes. Dirty license plates can also foil them. New Yorkers' love of double parking will also cause headaches. Snow, salt, and dirt can also confound the cameras, as will harsh sunlight and the differing designs of state license plates. The city's mass of buildings will make it difficult to transmit data via wireless, and setting up antennas to strengthen the signal will be hugely expensive. Finally, the transmitters used to send vehicle data can't be mounted near apartment buildings, because they tend to heat the body fluids of people who are sleeping or dormant for long periods of time.

At least the program has created some catchy new jargon. People who staunchly refuse to pay are the "motoring underclass," while "herd compliance effect" is the notion that if enough people agree to pay the tax, everyone else will fall in line.

And a new class of workers will also emerge, whose entire job will be to watch video screens to make sure the computer is correctly reading license plates. A good checker, one consultant claims, can read 600 images per shift. Sounds like fun.

In the end, it's going to be interesting to see how much of the plan survives the legislature. A poll released last week said that New Yorkers hate the idea, unless it results in improved mass transit.

But David Weprin, a former Democratic city councilman, said after Thursday's meeting that even a softer version would still be a "regressive tax that unfairly affects the middle class."

Stay tuned, and keep your wallet handy.