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New York congestion hearing draws scores

BY TIMOTHY ROBERTSON | Special to Newsday January 17, 2008

Dozens of speakers weighed in yesterday evening on alternative plans proposed by the state panel studying congestion pricing, and while some denounced it as a regressive tax, many voiced concerns over how the commission would guarantee that revenue will be used for transit improvements.

With more than 100 people inside the Hunter College auditorium on the Upper East Side, Assemb. Jonathan Bing (D-Manhattan) kicked the hearing off with a skeptical view of how the government would spend the millions generated by toll money.

"Government has a history of raising money for a particular purpose and spending it for something else, and we must try to prevent that from happening here," he said.

Walter McCaffrey of Keep NYC Congestion Tax Free added that any congestion plan would unfairly harm "outer borough" residents.

"You're going to end up having the feet held to the fire of the senior citizens that come from Queens and Brooklyn to Manhattan for their medical care," McCaffrey said.

Others supported alternate plans to Mayor Michael Bloomberg's original proposal, as long as the commission mandates that the funding is linked to MTA projects.

"With political will and vigilance, is possible," said Noah Budnick, deputy director of Transportation Alternatives.

While a few speakers wanted revenue to be used for a Second Avenue subway line to relieve the near-capacity Lexington Avenue line, one Queens man supported greater Long Island service.

"We need more funding for MTA, LIRR and Long Island Bus. We need more 24-hour [bus] routes and weekend service to our malls," said James Jagiello, 50, of Forest Hills.

Jagiello said commuters who work late in Manhattan have difficulty getting home to Queens and Long Island because of limited train and bus service at night.

Robert Yaro, president of the Regional Plan Association, criticized a plan that would prevent

drivers from entering the congestion zone on certain days. "It would hit small businesses the hardest by restricting the days when travel in the can be made," Yaro said.

Marc Ameruso, a TriBeCa resident and an EMT, asked if a person who lives in the congestion zone and works outside of it would get home at night if it wasn't the right day for the resident's car.

"This is where our homes are. We are not commuters," said Ameruso, 41.

The commission will hold hearings in the other boroughs and in Nassau on Thursday, ahead of its Jan. 31 deadline to give the state legislature its recommendation.