



News > Opinion

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KO congestion pricing

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When the state-appointed 17-member Traffic Mitigation Congestion Commission charged with studying ways to reduce congestion in Manhattan, voted overwhelming to approve a slightly modified version of Mayor Michael Bloomberg's congestion pricing plan, proponents of congestion pricing quickly declared victory.

While this round may have gone to congestion supporters, the fight over congestion pricing is definitely not over - actually, it is just beginning.

On Thursday, January 31, 13 members of the commission voted to approve an alternative to congestion pricing, which would charge cars \$8 and trucks \$21 to enter Manhattan south of 60th Street from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. during weekdays, increase metered parking rates within the zone as well as institute a \$1 surcharge for taxis.

The recommended plan eliminates the intra-zone fee and adds charges for motorists using the FDR Drive and Westside highways. The decision to permit toll offsets against the new fee further deducts the contributions people from New Jersey, Connecticut, and Long Island will contribute to mass transit - increasing the burden on Queens residents.

In addition, the commission's final plan does not guarantee that all necessary improvements to mass transit will be in place by implementation or that all funds raised from this scheme would go directly to mass transit.

The commission's final report acknowledges that funding the MTA capital plan must be the primary goal of revenues from congestion pricing and that all funds from increased on-street parking rates and the elimination of the resident parking tax exemption within the zone should be dedicated by the city. However, there are no guarantees.

We applaud Westchester Assemblymember Richard Brodsky and Manhattan Assemblymember Herman "Denny" Farrell for voting against the plan and realizing that according the latest polling data, the majority of New Yorkers and Queens residents still disapprove of the mayor's congestion plan.

However, we are astonished and disheartened that none of the borough's three commission members - Assemblymember Vivian Cook, Reverend Edwin Reed or Gerard Ronski - voted against the final plan. Cook, who did not attend the commission's final meeting or vote on the plan because of a previously scheduled doctor's appointment, said she did not believe her vote

against congestion pricing could have killed the plan - and she was right. Yet, showing up to vote no would have sent a resounding message to her constituents that she rejects any congestion plan.

Although we believe the commission failed miserably with its final report and failed to kill the ill-conceived plan - the next round is the city council's responsibility.

Therefore, we are calling on the members of the city council - especially the 14 members of the Queens delegation - to knock out congestion pricing before the March 31 deadline.

We implore all 41 councilmembers who represent outer-borough districts - including many who are going to seek higher citywide offices next year - to realize that the plan recommended by the state's commission still has too many unanswered questions, and if implemented, would have devastating effects on Queens' commuters and small business owners.

City Councilmembers - You can stop the fight now before it gets to the final round in Albany. The ball is in your court. Moreover, remember, we, along with all of our readers and your constituents (potential voters in 2009) will be watching how you vote.

