

Here's what seven concerned State Assembly Members who represents Queens shared with the Queens Chronicle concerning the Congestion Tax scheme:



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Queens Pols Reject Congestion Toll

by Lee Landor, Assistant Editor

Queens lawmakers are snubbing the recommendations recently approved by the state-appointed panel tasked with choosing the best way to reduce traffic congestion and generate revenue for mass transit in New York City.

After months of deliberation and more than 50 hours of public hearings, the 17-member panel, the Traffic Congestion Mitigation Commission, last Thursday recommended a modified version of the mayor's original congestion pricing plan.

At a meeting two days before the panel announced its recommendation, Queens legislators questioned commission Chairman Marc Shaw about the plan, according to **Assemblyman Rory Lancman** (D-Fresh Meadows).

Reiterating the concerns of some lawmakers, Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver said, "I believe that the commission's work is not done, and that there must be detailed responses regarding (several) issues." He added that the assembly couldn't further consider the recommendation until the Metropolitan Transportation Authority produced a five-year capital plan for it.

Silver also called for more details about charging bridge and tunnel users; the operation of parking permits; traffic enforcement measures; and providing low-income households with state and city tax credits for paying congestion fees.

Expressing similar concerns, Lancman said the commission "hasn't really moved the ball even one yard, because it more or less passed along the mayor's congestion pricing plan with some minor modifications — which actually hurt Queens."

The panel failed to do its job, according to Lancman, who has opposed congestion pricing since it was first introduced.

"(The commission) leaves open all the questions, which (it) was created to answer," he said. "We still don't have answers to our concerns that the congestion is going to be redistributed to the neighborhoods outside of the congestion pricing zone, as opposed to reduced."

Assemblyman **William Scarborough** (D-Jamaica) said his district, a major transit hub, would suffer under the panel's proposal, noting the prospect of park-and-ride commuters clogging the curbs with their vehicles all day. "I don't see anything but the creation of more problems," he said. "We already have parking problems in the area. And if this plan goes into affect, what we're going to have is an increase of people coming to the (local) subway areas."

Sharing in the discontent, **Assemblyman Michael Gianaris** (D-Astoria) said he is outraged that the plan is so heavily based on generating revenue, and that it acts as a tax, disproportionately effecting Queens. "It's been couched in environmental terms and traffic terms, but at the end of the day the goal is all about raising resources," he said. "And to do that while specifically exempting the wealthiest people on earth who live in Manhattan ... seems grossly unfair."

Gianaris said he doesn't plan to vote in favor of a plan that, he believes, burdens his constituents.

Assemblyman Mark Weprin (D-Little Neck) said the plan is more than a burden to Queens residents: it's discriminatory. "I'd sooner support a proposal that limited the ability of people who have cars in Manhattan to drive," he said, explaining that residents there have less need to drive than those living in his district, where transportation options are limited.

In parts of northern and eastern Queens, particularly Douglaston and Whitestone, the only available mode of transit to Manhattan is the express bus, which some assembly members have called inadequate.

Like some fellow legislators, **Assemblyman Anthony Seminerio** (D-Richmond Hill) is aggravated that drivers who pay tolls upon entering the city from New Jersey will not be charged extra to enter the pricing zone.

Assemblyman Ivan Lafayette (D-Jackson Heights), who sits on the assembly's transportation committee, said poor traffic enforcement and uncoordinated street repairs are the prime culprits of congestion. Reducing the number of cars in Manhattan "really doesn't mean very much," he added.

Of greatest concern to **Assemblywoman Audrey Pheffer** (D-Ozone Park) and her constituents is that no environmental impact statement has been conducted. Proponents of the plan have touted its benefits, citing citywide reductions in traffic congestion and asthma, she explained, but they aren't presenting facts — usually found in an environmental impact statement — to support such claims.

Pheffer also worries that the potential improvements to mass transit for Queens will be minimal and practically nonexistent for her district, although she acknowledges that it is difficult to anticipate what the MTA plans to do with the capital funding.

In the meantime, Gov. Eliot Spitzer, who created the commission, seems less concerned with details of exactly how the plan will be carried out and revenues will be spent. "The specifics of the plan will be discussed and debated," he said, "but the profound implications for our entire transit system are clear."

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