

<http://www.nysun.com/article/73472>

The Sun

March 24, 2008

Opinion

Why I Drive



-
By [ANDREW WOLF](#)

[March 24, 2008](#)

URL: <http://www.nysun.com/article/73472>

Last week, I spent a half hour debating with Transportation Commissioner Jannette Sadik-Khan over the issue of congestion pricing. Ms. Sadik-Khan came to my Bronx office to pitch her case to the editorial board of the Bronx Press and Riverdale Review newspapers, which I publish.

I have come to the conclusion that congestion pricing is bad public policy for the city. For the vast majority of New Yorkers, those of us in the outer boroughs and upper Manhattan, having an automobile is a defining point of entry into the middle class. Owning a car is a liberating experience — yes, many trips are best made by mass transit, but simply knowing that there is an alternative, one that opens up every corner of the city and beyond, is invigorating. Should we close off to those in poverty today that to which they, too, aspire?

I am not unsympathetic to Ms. Sadik-Khan and her arguments. In the late 1960s when others were espousing radical ideas about the state of the world, I was leading the City College Committee for Better Rapid Transit. I proposed new rail lines and bus routes, and testified at public hearings.

Unlike most of my contemporaries, I avoided learning to drive. I took girl friends out on dates using subways and buses, and when I got married, my wife and I started out living a car free life. On Saturday nights, we would happily take the number 12 bus from our apartment in the Pelham Parkway to the seafood restaurants on City Island or the movie theaters on Fordham Road. After the show, we would have dessert in Jahn's Ice Cream parlor, and happily catch our bus back home.

But we discovered that there were other places to go and things to do. I learned to drive and acquired a Fiat 124, a small Italian import that set me back all of \$2,500, brand new. Owning a Fiat is sort of a form of congestion pricing. It is said that Fiat is an acronym for "Fix It Again, Tony," and it seemed that the car was always in the shop, greatly diminishing the carbon footprint we didn't then know we had.

We have gone on to purchase more reliable vehicles, but it hasn't been easy being a driver in Gotham. We have had a car stolen, lost three car radios to thieves (and had to clean up the broken glass afterward), been towed for a tiny number of unpaid tickets, deposited innumerable dimes, and more recently quarters, and even more recently credit cards into parking meters. We have seen the toll on the tiny Henry Hudson Bridge, near our home, increase from a dime (enough to pay to build the bridge and then some) to \$2.75 just last week.

I have spent thousands on garages, a big chunk of which is taxes, and every time I put a gallon of gasoline into my tank, money flows into the coffers of the city, state, and federal governments. The sales tax alone on my most recent vehicle, a modest Toyota Camry, is about equivalent to what I spent in total on my first car 35 years ago.

But as a non-commuter (my office is just a few blocks from my home), I find that even when I travel to Manhattan, it is usually more efficient to drive, regardless of the cost. I have come to the conclusion that the one commodity we all have that is unrelentingly finite is time and that the mass transit from where I live wastes far too much of it. I believe a majority of those of us in the outer boroughs feel that way. I am willing to pay for this privilege, and I already do. Enough is enough.

Ms. Sadik-Khan and Mayor Bloomberg want to impose yet an additional tax on top of all of those we already pay. While she raises the same arguments about how the new tax will lead to a decline in asthma rates (I predict not a single case of asthma will be cured or prevented if this tax is imposed) and talks of providing transit for the million more people the mayor tells us are moving here, her case rings hollow. What she and the mayor really want is a new revenue stream for mass transit projects.

I'm convinced of neither the problem nor the solution. The one message I would leave with Ms. Sadik-Khan, from this former mass transit zealot, is that even with all the gold she can extract from our pockets, there will be no big transit projects in New York's future. A year after I was born, voters approved a bond issue for a Second Avenue subway, a now vastly truncated project that is still perhaps decades away from completion. In an earlier era, a Robert Moses could impose his vision on us. But as the West Side Stadium debacle should have taught the mayor, those days are over. But once the hand is in the pocket, politicians will find plenty of other things to which to divert this new revenue.

awolf@nysun.com