

No E-ZPass, Pay \$9.00

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The Wonkster

Taking the E-Z Way Out

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(More from the City Council's hearing on congestion pricing.)

While experts debate how much a congestion fee would cut traffic and air pollution, one thing does seem certain: It will boost EZ-Pass usage. Under the plan, users of the pass pay a congestion fee of \$8, **while those without the electronic passes would pay \$9**. And while the E-ZPass users have the fee deducted from the money in their account, those without the passes will have to figure out how to pay — and pay quickly. **The bill carries a \$65 fine for anyone who does not pay a congestion charge within 48 hours of incurring it.**

For now it's not clear where or how they would pay the fee, though Rit Aggarwala of the mayor's Office of Long-Term Planning said the city will "set up a wide spread of opportunities," including Internet payment, telephones payments and locations in existing stores.

The city wants people to get E-ZPasses. But whatever the merits of the E-ZPass, the preferential treatment given those who have them raises concerns about equity. **To get an E-ZPass, a person needs to have a credit card or bank account, keeping it out of the reach of some poor New Yorkers.** While transportation commissioner Janette Sadik-Khan said the city was working to develop a way to pay cash for an E-ZPass, that doesn't exist now. **In addition, an E-ZPass user must put down a \$10 deposit for each E-ZPass tag and must keep money in the E-ZPass account. Clearly such requirements favor more affluent people.**

This worries a congestion pricing advocate who asked to remain anonymous. While opponents of congestion pricing have often charged the tax is another burden on the poor, proponents tend to dismiss this, arguing that not very many poor people can afford a car, gas and Manhattan parking fees. But the advocate said, "This \$9 charge is the first time that people who said they are concerned about the impact on lower-income drivers of New York have an arguments on the merits because people who do not have an E-ZPass will pay an extra \$1.

And given the confusion about whether to pay that extra dollar, many will probably rack up a lot of these \$65 fees as well.

By Gail Robinson on March 24, 2008, 9:06 pm