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Newsday.com

Congestion pricing would have wide-ranging effects

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8:36 PM EDT, March 29, 2008

To Kathy Eisman, a real estate closer whose "office is my car," driving into Manhattan to work on various deals is an expensive business trip. If congestion pricing passes, the Plainview resident says, the cost may become prohibitive.

"I've already been turning down work because I can't afford to go," Eisman said last week.

To her and the nearly 32,100 other Long Islanders who the Tri-State Transportation Campaign says use their cars to commute to work in Manhattan below 60th Street -- the zone where many drivers would be charged \$8 to enter from outside of Manhattan during certain peak hours -- congestion pricing would have a wide variety of effects.

Consider Paul Aloe's situation. A lawyer who lives in Port Washington and drives his Jeep Liberty to work at the Empire State Building, Aloe wouldn't have to pay any of the congestion fee because he already spends \$4.15 for each of his two daily trips through the Midtown Tunnel.

The current plan would deduct those tolls from the congestion fee, negating it for him.

Those who use the free bridges, the Queensboro, Brooklyn, Manhattan, and Williamsburg, would pay the \$8 fee.

Even so, with parking costs easily the greatest expense for almost anyone driving into the zone, Aloe said, "I don't think another \$8 will change much" about people's decisions to drive into that part of Manhattan.

Therefore, he added, "I don't think congestion pricing will solve the problem."

Richard Bivone, a member of the congestion pricing commission appointed to study the issue and president of the Nassau County Council of Chambers of Commerce, has not heard much positive from Long Islanders.

"For the most part, the people I spoke to on Long Island said they could not afford an additional fee to drive into New York City," he said. "They felt it was going to have a negative impact."

Proponents of the plan say a regionwide decrease in traffic would help everyone. The state Department of Transportation figures that vehicle trips from Long Island into the Manhattan zone would drop 13 percent and that 6 percent more commuters would switch to public transit.

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority, which expects to receive \$4.5 billion through 2013 from congestion pricing fees to put toward system improvements, expects 3,500 of the daily car commuters from Long Island to switch to such public transit as the Long Island Rail Road.

Within New York City, about 78,000 drivers are expected to switch to public transit, according to city officials.

Chris Jones, vice president for research for the Regional Plan Association, said, "There would be some reduction in highway congestion if you're driving into Manhattan or not."

Traffic as measured by the number of miles traveled, in the zone is expected to drop 6.4 percent, state and city officials said. On Long Island, the total number of vehicle miles traveled is expected to drop minimally, by one-third of 1 percent.

Currently, 26 percent of Long Islanders who work in the zone drive -- some in carpools, but most of them alone -- while 74 percent use public transit, according to the Tri-State Campaign, a nonprofit organization based in Manhattan.

Ron Burke of Rockville Centre, a lawyer who said he uses the LIRR all but perhaps twice a month to get to work in the financial district, said less congestion could actually prompt him to start driving more.

"I would use my car a little more often," he said. "But not greatly."

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