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Editorial comment: Pay to play, Bloomberg-style

Our mayor doesn't so much twist arms as look for outstretched hands that he can fill with cash, so long as he gets his way.

Politicians have always employed the carrot and the stick to bargain for what they wanted, but Mayor Michael Bloomberg has refined the art of reward and threat to the point where perhaps we should call his a foie gras and stick strategy.

The mayor may have learned his approach in business, but he has honed it at City Hall. And it all began with Van Cortlandt Park.

Gathering the Bronx's state legislators in the back room of Democratic Party headquarters on Williamsbridge Road, in 2004 the mayor put \$200 million on the table and offered each politician who agreed to vote to build the Croton water filtration plant in the park a share of the money for parks in his or her district.

Without pausing to reflect that it's the city's job to build parks in neighborhoods that need them and to rehabilitate existing parks when they deteriorate, and certainly without establishing a hierarchy of priorities, the legislators reached for the money.

More recently, the city paid off local politicians with a \$30 million fund in return for agreeing to expand a sewage treatment plant in the South Bronx that will permanently inflict its stench and cast shadows on Barretto Point Park, a new and beautiful waterfront park built, in part, with filtration plant funds.

And just a week and a half ago, Mr. Bloomberg made a rare trip to the Bronx to offer new express bus service to residents of Throgs Neck — but only if his congestion pricing plan is enacted. In a symbolic gesture, the mayor refused to cut a ribbon symbolizing the new service, saying he'd come back to do that if the vote on his proposal to charge city residents who drive to Manhattan passes.

Fail to vote his way, he warned, and "there will be next to no major MTA capital projects in our immediate future."

Now, if you believe he intends to shelve the Second Avenue subway so important to Manhattan residents or to postpone the extension of the No. 7 line so crucial to the big real estate interests salivating to build on the far West Side, you might want to invest in our transit system by buying a certain wellknown bridge that crosses the East River. Nevertheless, in his performance at Throggs Neck, the mayor achieved a perfect fusion of carrot and stick. And the area's wavering Assemblyman Michael Benedetto told reporters that despite his reservations, he was inclined to vote for congestion pricing.

Think about it for a minute: whether New Yorkers get better bus service or new or improved parks is being decided not on the basis of need but on whether a politician's vote is available for purchase — with the money the city collects from us.

And remember this: long ago, before it became a cliché, the carrot and stick conjured an image. It evoked a plodding mule or goat or nag pulling a cart. The animal was stupid enough to move forward toward food that its driver kept visible but always out of reach. If it deviated from its path, it was beaten.

Is that the relationship you want with those you elect?