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Congestion Pricing: Just Another Regressive Tax?

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IF you were one of those Westchester residents who struggled with existential dread at the possibility of paying an additional \$8 a day for driving into Midtown or Downtown Manhattan, you need not have agitated yourself.

Except for a few frugal souls who now try to cross into Manhattan free by snaking their way to the toll-less Harlem River bridges, the fees exacted on Westchesterites by Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg's fruitless stab at easing traffic would have been zero to minimal — whatever was left after Triborough or Henry Hudson Bridge tolls were deducted, or \$2.50 a day at most.

Thus **Mr. Brodsky**, 61, in an interview at his Colonial-era home here, said he **had long opposed "pricing mechanisms as the preferred way of solving social problems."** **The reason: these schemes put the burden for paying the fees on blueblood and blue collar alike**, he said.

"I don't believe public places should be distributed based on an ability to pay," Mr. Brodsky said, stretching his suede cowboy boots out from his armchair while sipping a glass of tea. **"In the end I'm a progressive before I'm an environmentalist."**

However far **Mr. Brodsky** — or for that matter his entire '60s generation — may have strayed from younger, idealistic stirrings, combating traffic congestion with fees has for more than a decade seemed to him, well, regressive. **The people who would have borne the brunt were working- and middle-class stiffs in Brooklyn, Queens and the Bronx who for whatever reason feel they need to take a car into the area below 60th Street on workdays.**

Park Avenue co-op owners could easily have absorbed the \$8 fee. But it would have been tougher for the Flatbush carpenter who does not want to schlep his toolbox on the subway so he can renovate a Tribeca kitchen or the Queens home care attendant who might have to take a bus to a subway to care for an elderly woman in Gramercy Park but is lucky enough to have a husband who can drop her off on his way to work.

That \$8 fee can amount to \$2,000 a year, chump change for a Manhattan mogul but 5 percent of a year's income for a young municipal worker or secretary. Somehow, Mr. Brodsky said, issues of economic equity got lost in the debate and shrugged off by environmental groups.

"These pricing mechanisms try to modify behavior of people who can't afford to do what it is we want them to do," he said.

Some legislators say they think the easiest way to raise money is simply to increase taxes on people making over \$1 million a year. That thought may have been buttressed last week by a front-page article in The New York Times showing how, despite recession jitters, hedge fund traders and other tycoons are buying \$300,000 Bentleys and \$35,000 bottles of Champagne.

But opponents like Mr. Brodsky say that if a relatively novel twist like congestion pricing succeeds, governments desperate for money could start charging people for taking a walk in a city park or entering a library.

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