

Every Time I Hear That Train

Crain's editorial seems totally ignorant of the clear inefficiencies, inequity and unfairness in the lousy policy choice afforded by imposition of a congestion tax or any toll-tax variant when it opines for “bridge tolls” (MTA's plan for action, August, 2010). Government investment in things such as schools and transportation makes good public policy; we need trained and educated workers; we also need means for goods to flow and for workers to get to work; even telecommuters need to get around from time to time. That investment includes federal dollars that NYC mass transit needs to see much more of, particularly for transit operations. Rather than abandon mass transit, state legislators provided an impressive revenue package and deserve plaudits. The MTA, however, played budget games that thus far prevented the use of federal stimulus monies that could have averted service cuts. It should come clean (aka forensic accounting) and work with the legislature to make the adjustments that could restore the core services; reversing those disinvestments just make plain sense. It makes me think about the line *All the promises made and the ones that were kept* from the song that titles this commentary.

CRAIN'S

MTA's plan for action

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The Metropolitan Transportation Authority—the largest network of mass transit connections in the world—is teetering on the edge of financial collapse,” declares Andrew Cuomo's 224-page blueprint for New York, which he calls a “Plan for Action.”

Unfortunately, Mr. Cuomo has no plan in his Plan for Action to bolster the MTA's balance sheet. Gov. David Paterson has not offered one, either. Mayor Michael Bloomberg quietly called for “open road and gateless tolling” last year but has not pursued it.

Abandoned by politicians, the MTA has been left to close nine-figure budget deficits on its own. And notwithstanding the usual chorus of complaints, the agency under Chief Executive Jay Walder has done a credible job of it.

Last week, Mr. Walder proposed modest fare and toll increases and a cost-cutting program that promise to stave off additional service cuts through 2014. He is also proposing a \$1 fee for new MetroCards bought in the subway system, to motivate riders to refill old cards. Single-ride cards will incur a 25-cent fee. The savings will be modest—7 cents for each card not printed—but the MTA, which depends on fares for 52% of its revenue, must make every dime count. It took a public relations hit for eliminating underused buses and station agents, but that was the right thing to do.

Other common sense changes are needed. The MTA should increase its bridge and tunnel tolls more than its monthly MetroCard prices. The agency has proposed the opposite, inexplicably encouraging people to bring cars and trucks into Manhattan. It should also remove seats from a few rush-hour trains and the fronts of buses to speed loading and unloading and reduce crowding.

The most glaring anomaly of our transportation system is that drivers cross the East River gratis, while straphangers pay. This backward incentive snarls traffic in Brooklyn, Queens and lower Manhattan and deprives the MTA of much-needed funds. A few politicians still have emotional attachments to the notion of free bridges, but many state legislators are willing to impose tolls that match the subway fare. They should at least do that.

The big money is spent on personnel, accounting for two-thirds of the MTA's expenses. Those costs cannot be hacked away with a simple board vote. But the agency is making progress in other areas and is justified in asking for more funding. The Legislature should start with bridge tolls and work from there.