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Editorials February 23, 2011

Congestion Pricing Should Stay (Off) The Table

The words “congestion pricing” first appeared in this newspaper in an article on Nov. 16, 2005. From then to today, Wednesday, Feb. 16, 2011, the term has come up 88 times (this editorial brings the total to 89). We wrote seven editorials (this is number eight), at least three op-eds were submitted to us about the plan and we saw more than five letters to the editor on the topic.

It will surprise none of our readers to learn that the majority of opinions expressed about congestion pricing, the practice of imposing a fee for cars and commercial vehicles to enter Midtown Manhattan on weekdays during the hours between 6 a.m. and 6 p.m., fell into the category best described as “strongly opposed”. The plan, recently renamed “Transportation Pricing”, encountered the same reception when Congressman Anthony Weiner, surrounded by other elected officials and community leaders, denounced it on the steps of City Hall last Sunday.

The early versions of congestion pricing also called for imposing tolls on bridges spanning the East River. It was also proposed that parking permits be issued to residents of neighborhoods counting the East River as their westernmost border so that if they eschewed their cars in favor of mass transit they could have a fighting chance of finding a parking place despite competition from the many residents of Nassau, Suffolk Counties and Eastern Queens who, it was rightly postulated, would drive to neighborhoods boasting street parking and mass transit stations. The bridge tolls and parking permits were greeted with overwhelming lack of enthusiasm.

One would think that the higher-ups in city government would have gotten the idea by now. Congestion, or traffic, pricing may be looked upon favorably in some circles, but most of the city’s population in Queens, Brooklyn, The Bronx and even Staten Island see nothing positive in it whatever. A fee to drive into Manhattan would take a large bite out of many already strained household budgets, especially with mass transit fares escalating with dismaying frequency. Moreover, owners and proprietors of small businesses whose daily routine involves driving into Manhattan frequently have no choice but to drive and think, for example, of the obstacles a dry cleaner would encounter trying to take a rack of freshly cleaned garments on the subway instead of loading the merchandise into a small panel truck and driving to a Manhattan destination. The owners and proprietors of businesses whose operations involve food deliveries would encounter even more problems.

Tolls on East River bridges have not yet, to our knowledge, been made a part of the new traffic pricing scenario, but it is reasonable to believe that they lurk somewhere in the details of the plan. This practice, too, would sound a death knell for many of the businesses whose owners and employees must cross those bridges many times in the course of an average business day. We have not calculated the effect tolls would have on rising prices for goods and services on unwanted expenses.

We did not research our fellow publications, but we are certain that they also received and regarded the congestion pricing concept with as much enthusiasm as we and our news sources did. We have not heard of anyone in this borough supporting congestion pricing. Our elected representatives, in accordance with their constituents' wishes and of their own accord, were against the plan when it was first introduced. We trust they will continue to maintain their opposition to congestion, or traffic, pricing now. This idea deserves to remain forever off the table. There are surely other ways to alleviate traffic throughout New York City that will not penalize drivers. The city belongs to all of us. We are all entitled to be able to move about freely without incurring a financial penalty simply because we choose or need to move from one borough to another in the course of an average day.