



Falling Traffic Congestion a Symptom of Weak Economy

By ANDREW WOLF, Special to the Sun | May 23, 2012

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Urban traffic congestion is on the way down in most cities, according to a study recently released by a Washington State firm, INRIX. The data is based on monitoring GPS devices, maybe even yours, and reveals one interesting trend. If the economy of an area is doing well, you are more likely to get stuck in traffic.

A few years ago, this was the number one issue here in New York. Mayor Bloomberg, who has a home in London, became enamored of congestion pricing, which has raised billions for government there. He sought, unsuccessfully, to bring the concept to New York, I suspect more out of an appreciation for the scheme's revenue-raising potential than for any real concern over the time it takes us mere mortals to point "B" from point "A."

Mr. Bloomberg, who is used to jetting to Bermuda in less time than it takes other billionaires to drag their Mercedes out to the Hamptons, is a man in a hurry. So much of a hurry that he apparently has contrived to use the East Side heliport, perhaps illegally, when it is supposed to be closed.

That facility is scheduled to be open between 8 a.m. and 8 p.m. only on weekdays. This is in deference to the poor folks who live nearby, under siege from the exhaust and the deafening noise of the choppers. But for the man with the world's largest carbon footprint, this is a mere formality. The mayor somehow found the need to use the heliport eight times just last weekend.

A fellow who lives nearby videotaped hizzoner, along with his girlfriend Diana Taylor and her two dogs, taking off when the heliport was supposed to be closed. Obviously, official business. The videographer generously shared the tape with the folks at Channel 7.

For most of us, the only reason we take our cars into Manhattan has to do with money. For the most part we drive into Manhattan to either spend money or make some more. The nation's cities are not built for joy riders. A trip into the heart of America's cities almost always has a specific destination and constructive purpose.

After all, if I drive down from my home in Riverdale to pay a visit to my good friend Mr. Zabar on the Upper West Side, I am likely to leave some of my money with him, helping to feed not only the family Zabar but all of those nice folks who work for him.

Mr. Zabar, I suspect, pays a lot of taxes to the city, as do his employees. More directly, the city benefits from the two quarters I need to deposit in the nearby muni-meters, my rent for a mere 10 minutes parking on the street.

Since Mr. Zabar's store is quite large — and let's face it, fun to shop in — many quarters are liable to trickle into the city coffers. Not to mention the more than two bucks deducted from my E-Z Pass account, the fee for crossing the Henry Hudson Bridge. How about the taxes on the gasoline I buy, motor vehicle fees, and the occasional outrageously high fine for forgetting to bring enough quarters to feed the hungry muni-meter? Much more, and I may cut down my visits to my friend Mr. Zabar.

In that light, the news that traffic congestion seems to increase with economic health makes sense. Just as it makes sense that if you artificially suppress vehicular traffic by raising tolls, parking fees or imposing a congestion tax as Mayor Bloomberg tried to do, you are likely to diminish economic activity.

If the city really understood what was at play here, cutting the tolls on the bridge and lowering parking fees would bring more of my gluttonous friends to Mr. Zabar's fine establishment.

The road to economic health, to my mind, is paved with lox and bagels.

Although the Bloomberg congestion pricing scheme has been put on a back burner, it is far from dead. There is just too much money that such a tax would generate. Every year it is suggested again, and I suspect that it is only a matter of time before another major push is made to make it happen. There is simply little understanding on the part of the political class that continuing efforts to scare off motorists with high fees is sure to backfire. A price will be paid, and I suggest that it will be paid in jobs and income and a little bit less smoked fish on all of our plates.