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Several Queens politicians take a stand against potential tolls on Queensboro, East River bridges

Posted on by admin



Queens borough President Melinda Katz, Councilman Barry Grodenchik, and Assemblyman David Weprin gathered near the entrance of the Ed Koch Queensboro Bridge on Aug. 27 / Office of David Weprin

August 28, by Nathaly Pesantez

Several Queens politicians voiced their opposition yesterday to a proposal that would charge commuters a toll for using the Queensboro bridge—and three bridges in Brooklyn—citing the effect on middle class New Yorkers and small businesses in the outer boroughs.

Queens Borough President Melinda Katz, Councilman Barry Grodenchik and Assemblyman David Weprin expressed their disapproval of the proposal Sunday at a press conference near the entrance

of the Queensboro Bridge, one of the free East River bridges that may see the introduction of tolling if legislation is passed in Albany.

Weprin said at the gathering that Assembly Democrats met with the MTA last week to discuss potential plans to solve the MTA crisis, but made very clear one thing—that regardless of what plans are laid out, he will not accept any type of toll on free bridges connecting Manhattan to the boroughs.

“It would be a very bad thing for small businesses,” Weprin said. “It’s the heart of the middle class.”

Weprin also noted that middle-class New Yorkers have been using the free bridges to cross into Manhattan since 1911.

Katz said that several plans to introduce tolling in the free bridges have been introduced in past decades, beginning in the 1970s, but have all failed because of their infeasibility.

“You should be able to travel, even if it’s a little more burdensome, for free from borough to borough,” Katz said at the gathering.

Councilman Grodenchik said that the addition of a fare on free bridges is actually a “tax by another name”, which would impose financial burdens on residents who are already experiencing rising costs of living.

“To me the tolls are a non-starter,” Grodenchik said. “I think it would place an unfair burden especially in my district, where its already difficult to get around.”

Grondenchik, like Katz, was there to lend political clout, since it’s Albany lawmakers who will determine whether the plan goes into effect.

The gathering comes two weeks after Governor Andrew Cuomo, in the midst of the MTA’s “summer of hell”, said congestion pricing—charging drivers tolls to enter traffic-packed, congested areas— in Manhattan is “an idea whose time has come,” [according to The New York Times](#).

“We have been going through the problems with the old plan and trying to come up with an updated and frankly better congestion pricing plan,” Cuomo told the Times.

Mayor Bill de Blasio, however, has expressed his opposition to congestion pricing and believes the best way to raise funds for the MTA is by imposing a city tax on the very wealthy. He is advocating raising the city’s highest income tax rate by 0.534 percent to 4.41 percent for individuals making more than \$500,000 and couples making more than \$1 million. This tax increase, however, would require the approval of Albany too.

The concept of a wealth tax to raise funds for the MTA is backed by State Sen. Mike Gianaris, who represents western Queens and who has expressed skepticism for congestion pricing in the past.

While Councilmember Jimmy Van Bramer said he backs any plan that would fairly produce the revenue needed to fix mass transit, he vouches more for de Blasio’s idea to raise funds for the MTA through a tax applied to the wealthiest residents of the city.

The congestion pricing plan does have its supporters in Albany. Earlier this year, State Sen. Andrew Lanza (R-Staten Island) [introduced a bill](#) to establish the “Move New York Fair Plan”, which calls for tolls on the East River bridges. The bill aims to reduce traffic congestion while raising revenue for the MTA. A similar bill was also introduced in the Assembly by Assemblyman Robert Rodriguez (D-East Harlem).

The Assembly bill would add a toll to East River bridges, including the Queensboro, of \$5.54 with E-ZPass or \$8.00 without. The amount is pegged to the tolls at the Queens-Midtown Tunnel and Hugh L. Carey, or Brooklyn Battery Tunnel. The Senate’s version, however, puts forth a a \$5.00 toll with E-ZPass,

State Sen. Jose Peralta was the first state senator to endorse the Move NY Plan, [expressing his support](#) for congestion pricing in the past and reaffirming it in a statement today.

“As we are about to have survived the summer of hell, not without endless commuter nightmares, it is time we seek a permanent solution for our decaying public mass transit system,” Peralta said in a statement. “I understand some of my colleagues’ concerns, but the door should not be shut until all mass transit options...are thoroughly discussed.”

Calls to Assemblywoman Cathy Nolan, who represents Long Island City and Sunnyside (among other neighborhoods), as well as to Assemblywoman Aravella Simotas, who represents Astoria, for comment were not returned.

While no specific plans have been put in place, a blueprint has been provided by [Move NY](#), a grassroots campaign that first laid out ideas “to make the city’s tolling system fairer” by reducing tolls on bridges that currently have them and adding and restoring tolls on other bridges.

Councilman Grodenchik said Governor Cuomo promised New York politicians that a more thorough and specific plan to fund the MTA would be introduced early next year.

The “congestion pricing” model was first introduced by former Mayor Bloomberg in 2007. In a [study conducted by Quinnipiac University Poll](#), New Yorkers by large were not in favor of congestion pricing, but said that traffic congestion is a “very serious” or “somewhat serious” problem.