

http://queensexaminer.com/view/full_story/27471147/article-Queens-pols--civic-leaders-oppose-East-River-bridge-tolls?instance=home_news_2nd_left

Queens Examiner - Queens pols civic leaders oppose East River bridge tolls



As Governor Andrew Cuomo and Mayor Bill de Blasio debate how to best fund MTA improvements, Queens elected officials want to ensure that East River bridge crossings remain free for drivers under any proposal.

Last Sunday, Assemblyman David Weprin, Borough President Melinda Katz and Councilman Barry Grodenchik joined business and civic leaders in front of the Queensboro Bridge to strike down any prospect of adding tolls to the four free East River bridges: Williamsburg, Manhattan, Brooklyn and Queensboro.

“We’re willing to listen to every idea from every source, we have a number of suggestions and proposals,” Weprin said. “But whatever proposal comes out, whatever the ideas are, we will not accept tolls on the free East River bridges.”

Weprin, who represents neighborhoods in eastern Queens that lack public transportation options, argued that the four bridges have been free to cross since 1911.

Any change to that system would negatively impact residents and small businesses that use the bridges, he said.

“Those residents drive into Manhattan not because it’s a pleasant experience, not because they enjoy traffic, but because they feel they have no other option,” Weprin said.

The governor has expressed support for congestion pricing, and will likely announce a plan in his State of the State address early next year. But Katz noted on Sunday that congestion pricing proposals have come up in the 1970s, in 2006, and again last year.

“Every single time, they've been dead on arrival,” she said. “I don't think anybody would doubt that we need to have some sort of [funding] stream, but the past proposals that have been given to us don't have any direct stream to the MTA for particular upgrades on the system.”

Katz said from her perspective, it's inequitable to charge people “to go into a certain area of Manhattan if they're not from there.”

“You should be able to travel, even if it's a little more burdensome, for free somehow from borough to borough,” she said.

Grodenschik, whose district touches the Long Island border, also repeated that it should not cost money to go from one part of the city to another.

“By imposing a toll, which is a tax by another name, we are greatly hindering the commerce of the people of Queens and Brooklyn,” he said. “It would be a disaster for small businesses and all people that need to get into Manhattan.”

Thomas Grech, executive director of the Queens Chamber of Commerce, called a potential toll on the East River crossings “regressive.”

“At the end of the day, it's really hard to do business in the city of New York,” he said. “It's really another tax in disguise.”

When asked how he would solve the MTA's funding shortfall, Weprin suggested a commuter tax instead. He reiterated that he's open to all ideas as long as they don't include tolling the free bridges.

Both Weprin and Grodenchik also stated their opposition to the Move New York plan, a congestion pricing proposal that includes adding tolls on the East River crossings and lowering tolls elsewhere.

“The tolls on this bridge and every other bridge that crosses the East River is off the table as far as we're concerned,” Grodenchik said. “We're going to do everything that we can to fight it.”

“I can travel from here to Montauk point without paying a toll,” he added. “Why should I have to pay a toll to go in the reverse direction?”