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http://www.qgazette.com/news/2017-08-30/Front_Page/No_New_Tolls.html

‘No New Tolls!’

L. to r.); Phil Konigsberg of the Bay Terrace Community Alliance, Queens Borough President Melinda Katz, Corey Bearak of KeepNYCFree.com, Rich Hellenbrecht of the Queens Civic Congress, NYS Assemblyman David Weprin, Bob Friedrich,



“No New Tolls!” was the message of the morning for NYS Assemblyman David I. Weprin, Queens Borough President Melinda Katz and NYC Councilman Barry Grodenchik, as they gathered with representatives of the Queens Chamber of Commerce, Queens Civic Congress and a host of other civic groups by the foot of the Queensboro Bridge. The group assembled to express their opposition to any proposed funding plan that includes the tolling of the free East River bridges, which have been free since 1911.

Assemblyman Weprin and his colleagues shared a variety of reasons as to why tolling would be unacceptable for Queens residents and businesses. In addition to imposing a new financial burden on the working- and middle-class residents of the outer boroughs for the benefit of those who choose to reside in the center of the city, new tolls would also be a major financial burden on New York’s small businesses that rely on the free bridges to keep costs down. Added tolling will not only reduce the competitive ability of these businesses, but will also lead to added costs for New York’s consumers. Speakers also brought up that not all locations in New York City are easily accessible by public transportation. New Yorkers in northern, southern, and eastern Queens, along with residents of certain areas of Brooklyn lack access to subway stations near their homes and businesses, and rely on access to the free East River bridges for transportation; whether for work, to visit family members, or to travel to Manhattan to receive essential medical care not often accessible in outer-borough hospitals. With New Yorkers across the city already struggling with the rising cost of living, the group expressed that an additional tax on the middle class in the form of these tolls is simply unacceptable for the people of New York. Weprin did leave the possibility of supporting alternative plans to adequately fund New York City’s transportation infrastructure, as long as those plans did not include placing tolls on the free East River bridges. “Tolling the East River bridges would be devastating for Queens, Brooklyn and Long Island residents,” said Assemblyman Weprin. “The people who rely on these bridges are a diverse group of New Yorkers who are trying to make affordable choices in this city, and any future transportation plan for New York must take into the account the needs of outer borough residents.”



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“It would landlock our borough. Just as it’s hard to justify any fare increase for riders, it’s also hard to justify a bridge-and-tunnel toll that isn’t coupled with specific increases in service. We are one city, and it is fundamentally unfair to charge residents a fee to travel within one city, from one part of the city to another. It is certainly unfair to the families who live in the transit desert of Queens,” said Borough President Katz.

“Tolling the free East River bridges is a misguided proposal that is unacceptable to the residents of Eastern Queens. These tolls are in fact a regressive tax on people who have limited public transportation options and would impose an unjustifiable financial burden on Queens residents, especially commuters, who are already struggling with rising costs of living,” said Councilman Grodenchik (D-Oakland Gardens). “It is time for the MTA to get its fiscal house in order before further burdening area residents.”

“Doing business today in NYC is tougher than ever,” said Thomas J. Grech, Executive Director of the Queens Chamber of Commerce. “Putting tolls on the East River bridges will be just another incentive for firms to think about relocating out of New York.”

“There is a misperception that those who drive into Manhattan and back out do so for selfish reasons. While that may be true for some, most do so for valid reasons. There are many such reasons including limiting physical disabilities that make navigating stairs impossible, a need to carry tools or other items especially when platforms and cars (on the train) are overcrowded, being ill and seeking specialty care at tertiary health centers, as well as many others. Most of those who utilize our East River crossings are lower- or middle-income residents who have seen their buying power reduced over the last decade. They should not be burdened by imposing tolls,” said Kevin Forrestal, President of the Queens Civic Congress.

“Any toll-tax scheme fails to raise the revenues needed, offers no benefits and hurts the economy. Tolling New York City’s free East River bridges connecting Brooklyn and Queens to Manhattan will not move New York,” said Corey Bearak of KeepNYCFree.com.

See the Gazette Editorial on the topic, “Cars Are Not Going Away” (August 16), online at QGazette.com.