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Toll proposals seen as a no-go in Queens

Government, business, civic leaders line up against East River, congestion fees



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Assemblyman David Weprin, at microphone Phil Konigsberg of the Bay Terrace Community Alliance, left, Borough President Melinda Katz, Corey Bearak of KeepNYCFree.com, Rich Hellenbrecht of the Queens Civic Congress, Bob Friedrich of Glen Oaks Village, Councilman Barry Grodenchik, Bobby Sher of Bell Park Manor Terrace and Thomas Grech of the Queens Chamber of Commerce spoke out Sunday to oppose any new tolls over the East River.

The East River bridges between Queens and Manhattan have been free since 1911. And business, civic and political leaders stood in the shadow of the Ed Koch-Queensboro Bridge on Sunday demanding that it be kept that way.

While Gov. Cuomo two weeks ago told The New York Times that congestion pricing “is an idea whose time has come,” Assemblyman David Weprin (D-Fresh Meadows), Borough President Melinda Katz and Councilman Barry Grodenchik (D-Oakland Gardens) and others were in Long Island City to protest any plan that would impose tolls on the Queensboro, Manhattan, Brooklyn or Williamsburg bridges.

Other aspects of the current Move NY plan, and some others dating back to the Mike Bloomberg administration, include charging drivers a fee for entering Manhattan below 60th Street, or crossing 60th Street going south, and toll reductions at crossings that include the Whitestone, Throgs Neck and Triborough bridges.

The primary aim, aside from reducing traffic, is to raise revenue for the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, though the Move NY plan, unlike earlier versions, attempts to sweeten the pot for drivers with \$375 million in new spending per year for bridges and roadways.

Weprin and the others said a toll only serves to benefit Manhattanites at the expense of Queens residents and businesses.

“Tolling the East River bridges would be devastating for Queens, Brooklyn and Long Island residents,” Weprin said in a statement issued by his office. “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.”

Katz said such a measure “would landlock” Queens.

“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,” she said. “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.”

Grodenschik called any such proposal misguided and a regressive tax. The councilman had his own suggestion for the MTA to scrape up some revenue: Find it internally.

“It is time for the MTA to get its fiscal house in order before further burdening area residents,” he said. The politicians were joined by Thomas Grech, executive director of the Queens Chamber of Commerce, and a number of civic leaders.

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

Move NY supporters say the plan would cap commercial vehicles and taxis to one toll per day.

A video of the press conference is available on Weprin’s official Facebook page.

Cuomo offered few details when seemingly embracing some sort of congestion pricing idea back on Aug. 21, though Mayor de Blasio, to no one’s surprise, was quoted in published reports as saying he thinks such a plan could not pass in Albany’s Republican-controlled state Senate.

He added that he has never seen a congestion pricing proposition that he felt was fair. The mayor himself recently floated the idea of a new “millionaire’s tax” on high-income earners. State Sen. Mike Gianaris (D-Astoria) has crafted a bill to do just that. But Cuomo called the mayor’s proposal “dead on arrival” in the state capital. Through a spokesman on Monday morning, the governor also chided the speakers at Sunday’s press conference.

“There are a variety of models that are being reviewed, vetted and analyzed,” spokesman Jon Weinstein said in an email to the Chronicle. “It’s perplexing that Melinda Katz, David Weprin and Barry Grodenschik could hold a press conference on a proposal that hasn’t been proposed yet — they should really know the facts first.”

Cuomo’s office has said repeatedly that limited impact on outerborough residents will be an essential part of any plan that moves forward.