

Congestion Pricing Haunts New York

Regressive fees for access to public goods are the darling of the right, and they're showing up with greater frequency. New York should not be legitimizing the concept.

Richard Brodsky, Contributor Senior Fellow, Demos Action, former 14-term New York State Assemblyman from Westchester County NY

Here's an idea. Let's charge a fee for coming into Midtown Manhattan. Eight bucks. And everybody — rich, poor, middle-income — pays the same eight bucks. Driving an '89 Chevy? Eight bucks. Driving a new Maserati? Eight bucks.

This will keep the riff-raff off the roads and continue the trend that makes NYC safe for Russian billionaires and investment bankers.

Usually, when someone suggests a flat fee for access to public lands or services, there is appropriate outrage from the left (of which I count myself a member). **Flat fees are regressive, they are paid at the same rate, regardless of ability to pay.** Progressive taxation, the bedrock of American policy since FDR, says we make the rich and super-rich pay more. That's fair and sensible and, well, progressive.

Opposition to regressive flat fees used to be a bedrock principle of American progressivism. Unless. Let's give it a fancy name, suggestive of environmental sensitivity and, voila, it's not so bad. Let's call it "congestion pricing" and normally sensible folks drink the Kool-Aid and support it.

Such is life in New York right now. Congestion pricing was the brainchild of our last Republican billionaire mayor, Mike Bloomberg. A sometimes estimable mayor, he tried to jam a flat fee for Manhattan access 10 years ago and was justly routed. The ostensible reason then was to reduce traffic congestion.

A final note on the politics. It is a fair criticism of the Democratic Party that it has been insensitive to the needs and perceptions of middle-income folks. It would do everyone a whole lot of good to think through congestion pricing, as a matter of progressive principle, and as a matter of practical politics. Neither of those things has happened yet.

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