

OPINION

Congestion pricing, elitism in action

Be our guest

By Richard Brodsky

The fundamental flaws of congestion pricing schemes are being glossed over as various elites try to steamroll their proposals through. A secretive committee packed with gubernatorial appointees called the Metropolitan Transportation Sustainability Advisory Workgroup, not unlike what gave us the Albany pay raise fiasco, is now trying to shape a proposal that Albany can impose on New York City. Not an easy task, and not the right thing to do.

The theory of congestion pricing is certainly worth discussing: make it expensive to drive in Midtown and fewer people will do so, alleviating traffic and generating revenue in the process. Flat pricing mechanisms can work.

Or they can oppress middle-income and poor folks and cement this as a city accessible to the rich and comfortable but hard to manage if you work for a living. In practice, congestion pricing as currently being considered would be a regressive experiment in social engineering, whatever its theoretical virtues.

The desperate need for money for funding for the aging subway system, which needs billions to overhaul its signals and other equipment, and billions more for operating budgets, is distorting the previously sensible reluctance to create class barriers to public spaces.

Pause for a moment and examine the precedent Gov. Cuomo et al are trying to enshrine. If a public place gets overcrowded, the government charges a flat fee to get in. If it works for streets, it can also work for parks or libraries or swimming pools. The law of

unintended consequences will inevitably give us new proposals to fund public services by flat fees instead of broad-based taxes.
Be careful what you wish for.

The congestion pricing proposals likely to emerge from the governor will make Manhattan easier to get to if you're rich enough to blink at an \$11 entry fee. Limos, BMWs and for-hire vehicles will abound. Chevys, not so much. Queens, the Bronx and Brooklyn — and people further out from the core of Manhattan — will pay disproportionately.

There are dozens of legitimate practical concerns as well. How will Uber cars be handled? Who gets the money, all MTA systems or just the subway? Who decides? Will the fee be paid by folks just passing through on the FDR and West Side Highway?

Will new congestion zones be added in downtown Brooklyn, Bronx and Queens? How will residents within the congestion zone be charged? Will the government be tracking all vehicles in the zone, and what privacy risks does that create?

Both proponents and opponents deserve better than another secret committee and another decision about how the city functions made in the rush and heat of Albany budget negotiations. Alternatives such as a millionaire's tax, progressive congestion charges based on the cost or weight of vehicles seem to already have been summarily cast aside.

As is the notion of tolling the East River Bridges, which avoids setting the damning precedent of flat fees funding public programs.

We're making New York City accessible only to elites and doing so in the name of progress, be it Amazon incentives, or rezoning deals or congestion pricing.

Bad process yields bad results. Bad results yield political anger. Across the globe in recent months and years, we've seen outbursts against fuel taxes, austerity programs and things that make life difficult for average people, all of which originated with well-intentioned elites largely immune from the consequences of their own policies.

We've been warned what happens when fundamentally unjust policies are imposed.

Brodsky is a former state assemblyman from Westchester.

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