

An Alternative Plan to Congestion Pricing

From
Councilman Lew Fidler, Assistant Majority Leader



The 9 Carat Stone Plan



A 9 Point Plan to Clean our Air, Reduce All Traffic, and Support Transportation Operations in New York's Environs

The most laudable goal of the otherwise regressive and undesirable proposal to impose congestion pricing is clean air. Yet, congestion pricing, at best, simply reduces air pollution in the central business district of Manhattan while potentially shifting poorer air quality to neighborhoods with higher asthma rates. We can and should think bigger and more boldly to clean *everyone's* air.

Traffic congestion and transportation are not questions local to one section of our City. In fact, both are regional issues, and call for regional solutions.

Even the staunchest advocates of congestion pricing admit that the City and our region cannot subsist on mass transit alone. Clearly, even improved systems would be incapable of handling all comers without other aspects of our transportation infrastructure. We need to craft a solution that will not only be able to sustain maintenance and improvements of our mass transit system, but of the commuter rails that feed into our City and the roads, tunnels and bridges as well.



The Plan



1 "a, b and c" Construct 3 Critical Tunnels

Construct the Cross Harbor Freight Tunnel, which would take approximately 1,000,000 million truck runs off the streets of New York City every year.

Construct a Trans-Narrows Tunnel that would connect the light commuter rail system on Staten Island to the New York City subway system.

Construct a Gowanus Tunnel to sink the Gowanus Expressway and open the West Brooklyn waterfront to parkland and economic development.

1a. The Cross Harbor Tunnel The most noxious traffic in our City comes from trucks. Trucks, though they move necessary freight, take up the space of 3-4 passenger vehicles, spew far more pollution, and cause the

vast majority of wear and tear on our existing roadways and bridges. The Cross Harbor Freight tunnel would vastly reduce the number of trucks lumbering through our City. With a study grant of \$100 million from the Federal government already in place, a considerable portion of the estimated \$6 billion cost can be expected to come from the Federal government.

There are numerous other benefits to the Cross Harbor Tunnel. (see the Schneider memo, Exhibit A.) These include the creation of approximately 23,000 permanent jobs, over 4,000 construction jobs, savings in terms of road repair and maintenance of as much as \$3.7 billion, the creation of a third arterial for freight into the City, and the obvious benefits for cleaner air.

It is important to note that an extraordinary percentage of New York's freight is now trucked through a limited number of routes, which presents a greater security risk for our City.

Problems such as train noise can be dealt with utilizing the same technology that dampens highway noise and there are a myriad of economic development opportunities for locations along the railroad line (Brooklyn Terminal Market and the East New York Industrial Park to name two). In the 1960's, the City Administration proposed a Linear City along the line. The time and location may well have not been right then, but might well be now.

For further information on the value of the Cross Harbor Tunnel, see the power point presentation, Exhibit B.

1b. The Trans-Narrows Tunnel. No one disputes that the number of Staten Islanders who commute by car exceeds that of all other boros. The reason for that is obvious: Staten Islanders have no access to our subway system. Gasoline engines, with their concomitant air pollution, are part of almost every Staten Islander's commute to work.

Long ago, plans were on the drawing board to connect St. George in Staten Island to the 4th Avenue subway line at 65th Street in Brooklyn. Not only were those plans abandoned, but the decision was made to construct the Verrazano Bridge without commuter rail capacity. In 1929, the cost of the tunnel would have been \$29 million. The cost would obviously be geometrically higher today. However, it would have to cost less than the longer Cross Harbor Freight Tunnel.

It is impossible to estimate how many cars would come off our streets in and outside of our central Manhattan business district as a result of this new transit option for Staten Islanders. However, clearly many of those without that choice today would make the commuter train choice were it available, particularly if the Staten Island commuter train system were upgraded and made more accessible to Staten Islanders.

For more information on the Trans-Harbor Tunnel, see the Schneider memo, Exhibit A.

1c. The Gowanus Expressway Tunnel. Some investments pay for themselves. The Gowanus Expressway has long been one of the *country's* most overtaxed and overused roads. It is a congestion and air pollution nightmare. Even worse, it cuts off the western Brooklyn waterfront from the residential communities to its east. The parallels to the old raised West Side Highway in Manhattan are enormous.

Sinking the Gowanus Expressway into a tunnel would open the west Brooklyn waterfront to new parkland, economic development and housing. While we have been willing to invest hundreds of millions of dollars in both the Hudson Yards area of Manhattan, and in the development of the western shore of Manhattan, little or nothing has been done to develop this vast area of Brooklyn's waterfront.

The cost of this tunnel would be reduced by the economy of scale of building two other tunnels in the region at the same time, and reduced by the enormous maintenance costs of constantly repairing the elevated roadway that is the Gowanus. In the 1990's, the Regional Plan Association estimated the cost of the Gowanus Tunnel to be \$2.4 billion. (See the Schneider memo, Exhibit A.) This cost would likely increase beyond inflation if the added benefit of a subway link was included in it. However, over time, the creation of new communities, new economic engines and beautiful waterfront parks, would more than pay for the Gowanus Tunnel. It is the same principal that has driven the Bloomberg Administration's plan for Hudson Yards. It might not be Manhattan, but it is just as deserving.



2. Force the Issue of Hydrogen Fuel Cell Vehicles

Let's face it: gasoline combustion engines have been fouling our air. If there were a zero emission, technologically and economically viable alternative, who wouldn't favor its use. Well, there is.

No, I haven't been watching too much *Star Trek*. Hydrogen fuel cell cars are here and viable. In fact, just recently, Chevrolet began public test drives of a hydrogen fueled SUV. (See Daily News article, 10/23/07, Exhibit C.) Even General Motors is predicting that by 2017, Hydrogen fuel cells will be available for all GM cars.

We can't afford that wait. We need to start a real national campaign to force this issue. If Mayor Bloomberg can do it for gun control, we can do it for clean air. There is little we can do to clean our air that would do more than ending the heyday of the gasoline combustion engine.

We can incentivize the research needed to find the final answers to the few remaining issues (range of more than 150 miles, for one.) We can set a deadline after which the manufacture and importation of gasoline combustion engines would be unlawful. And we need to find a way to convert the infrastructure of gas stations to hydrogen re-fueling stations. Market forces won't do it alone, and big oil will stand in the way.

We can protect our domestic oil and enjoy the geo-political benefits of reducing the importance of foreign oil as well.

For a full analysis of alternative fuel vehicles and Hydrogen fuel cell cars, see the Wilcox memo, Exhibit D.



3. Paying for it: A .0033% Regional Payroll Tax

By now, you must be asking, how do we pay for all this tunneling, and for improvements to mass transit? After all, congestion pricing is allegedly designed to generate funds to support mass transit improvements. But let's look at that proposition for a moment.

It is claimed that congestion pricing at its present pricing level would generate some \$300–400 million dollars in transit support revenue annually. The cost of collecting this revenue is high, with some estimates reaching nearly 50% of the gross revenues going for collection alone. Even these numbers are in dispute, and there has been little or no analysis of how this money would be spent. Has anyone added the cost of all the promised improvements to see if that projected sum will pay for it all? Not that I have seen.

Additionally, congestion pricing taxes only a relatively small number of users for the sake of solving a problem that affects an entire region. Transportation is a regional issue. Congestion and traffic are not limited to the central business district of Manhattan. Even after we add trains to the subway routes that can absorb them, and express buses wherever possible, our subways, commuter rails, roads and bridges will still be in dire need of maintenance and improvement.

The answer is a one-third of one percent Payroll tax to be imposed on businesses not only in the City of New York, but in Rockland, Westchester, Nassau and Suffolk Counties as well. And this won't be a commuter tax as the revenues would go to a dedicated authority that would plan and pay for improvements and maintenance of our subways, commuter rails, highways, bridges and tunnels. The money would be used regionally and not just within the City because commuting to work and transportation are regional issues. Government at all levels would have to commit to maintaining existing levels of funding so that this revenue would be additional.

The burden? The tax for a paid employee earning \$50,000 per year would be about \$3 per week, or \$150 per annum.

The benefit? This infinitesimal payroll tax would generate \$1 billion a year in the beginning. In 15 years, that amount would double per annum. While the estimates of the Independent Budget Office and the NY City Council Finance staff differ to some small degree, (see Exhibit E, the memos of Nadine Felton, Council Finance, and the IBO–Lee memo), both estimate the annual revenue in the billions of dollars. (Note: both agencies were asked to calculate revenue based on a 1% payroll tax. I have assumed that a tax at one-third of that rate would generate one-third of the revenue.)

A payroll tax would not cost as much to collect as congestion pricing would, and would share the burden of paying for commuting to work fairly, by taxing all types of commuters in all areas---not just Manhattan's central business district. As such, more revenue would be raised from more people at a lower rate, and more equitably apportioned.



4. Increase the number of metered parking spaces in the central business district and the cost of parking.

It is estimated that there are over 10,000 unmetered parking spaces in the commercial areas of the central business district (See Alternative Approaches to Traffic Congestion Mitigation in the Manhattan Central Business District, Coalition to Keep NYC Congestion Tax Free.) That same report notes that a study in 1995 found that 15% of the vehicle miles traveled in west Midtown were traveled by drivers looking for parking spots.

Metering more parking spots in the central business district, and increasing the parking rates modestly, should encourage increased turnover of parking spots in the commercial areas of the central business district.

We should be careful *not* to effect this solution in areas that have higher concentrations of residential units. Doing so would unfairly penalize Manhattanites who are not wealthy enough to own an off-street parking spot, but still need to maintain a vehicle.



5. Increase the number of taxi stands in the CBD.

An astonishing 33% of vehicle miles traveled in the central business district are driven by Yellow Taxis. According to data prepared for the Taxi and Limousine Commission in 1995, cruising for passengers accounted for 39% of vehicle miles traveled by taxis.

These facts cry out for a cultural change. Its time to discourage mid street hails, which typically result in a cab driver stopping in mid-traffic to pick up a fare.

Increasing the number of taxi stands, and equipping them with shelters for all weather comfort might just work. Taxi drivers seeking fares, hoping to reduce fuel costs, might well gravitate to the Taxi Stands if they knew that people would use them. Riders, knowing that available cabs would be looking for them at the shelters would gravitate to the shelters.

Surely, not all riders would do this, and not all taxi drivers would either. But if just a third of them did, the enormous reduction of both cruising miles in the CBD and of taxis stopping in mid street and in the midst of traffic would have an enormous impact: fewer vehicle miles in the CBD and less congestion. And cleaner air.



6. Getting Unloading Trucks off the Street. More loading zones and more off-street loading docks.

Any trip through the CBD makes it obvious that lanes of traffic flow are lost to double parked commercial vehicles loading and unloading. Vital as this may be to commerce, it is anathema to the flow of traffic. Double parking tickets are just absorbed as a “cost of doing business” I wonder at just how much the parking ticket bill is for UPS and Federal Express, and whether or not they actually pay it all.

We need to increase the number of loading zones on streets where they are most needed. Loading and unloading trucks would no longer impede traffic flow as greatly as they do now if they were actually able to lawfully pull up to the curb.

For any new construction or substantial renovations of commercial buildings in the CBD, the law must require off street loading docks. Moving these trucks off the street would be an even better alternative to loading zones on the street. Obviously, we can't force existing buildings to build them, but we should require them wherever we can.

This element of the plan won't reduce the number of cars in the CBD, but it will improve traffic flow, and therefore, decrease air pollution.



7. Increase enforcement and fines for violators.

If we create more taxi stands, loading zones and meters in the CBD, and they are used illegally by drivers for other than the purpose they were intended, our purpose will be defeated. The unloading truck will still double park, the taxi still cruise for fares and the driver looking for parking will still have to drive around the block.

Fines for violations within the CBD should be increased significantly to truly deter violators. Signs should warn potential violators “not to even think of parking here” and advising of increased, stiffer fines.

Enforcement agents would have to be hired and deployed to step up enforcement. And while we are at it, increased fines and enforcement for “blocking the box” and driving in Bus lanes should be happening too.



8. No one way tolls for trucks.

Former DOT Commissioner Sam Schwartz estimates that trucks make over 10,000 trips daily through Manhattan. Many of these trips are being made to avoid tolls. Trucks traveling westbound out of New York City do not pay a toll going over the George Washington Bridge or through the

Holland or Lincoln Tunnels. Conversely, tolls are charged only westerly to vehicles leaving New York City on the Verrazano Bridge.

Surely, some percentage of the trucks traveling through the CBD do so to avoid the toll. Trucks are the most noxious traffic as discussed earlier. Inconvenient as it may be to impose, all crossings out of NYC should have a two way toll for trucks. It would be difficult to estimate the amount of the reduction, but certainly this would reduce unnecessary truck traffic in the CBD.



9. Move City agencies out of the CBD and *not* to downtown districts in the outer boroughs.

Not every City agency needs to be in Manhattan. In the past, when some agencies were moved from Manhattan to the outer boroughs, they barely made it over the bridge. Most went to downtown business districts. The outer borough business districts are considerably congested too.

The City ought to examine which subway lines are underutilized the most *heading away* from the CBD during rush hour and re-site City agencies on commercial strips in neighborhoods farther along those train lines.

For example, we all know that the “L” train is heavily congested heading towards Manhattan during rush hour and coming back to Brooklyn during the afternoon rush. But, is it running anywhere near capacity in the other direction at those times? Why not take advantage of that by asking those agencies to move to those communities. After all, the ride is the same length in either direction.

In addition to relieving some congestion in the CBD, and taking a number of parking placards off CBD streets, (we can spare ourselves the debate as to whether these placards are fair and necessary), side benefits include reduced space costs for City agencies and boosts to local economies in outer borough neighborhoods.



Conclusion



We can do better. We can think bigger. Congestion pricing is a costly way to collect revenue. It's regressive and puts the burden for supporting mass transit on a selective and relative few. It parses access to the Central Business District of our City economically. It won't bother the rich, but it will affect the poor and the middle class. That may be fair when it comes to buying a fur coat or a Rolex watch, but it's just not the right way to allocate access to the central business district of a City.

Yet, the congestion pricing plan does attempt to tackle legitimate problems---so we need alternatives.

We can clean our air. We can plan our transportation regionally. We can share the burden of maintaining and improving all transportation options equitably. And while we are doing it, we can create parkland, and stimulate economic development throughout the City.

New York is more than the central business district. Its five boroughs. We can all benefit. We just have to think big.

“Some people see things as they are and say why. Others dream things that never were, and say, why not?”

The task is daunting, but it can be done.



Support the 9 Carat Stone.

