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Congestion Pricing: An Incomplete Solution
by Tom Angotti
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New Yorkers who read more than one newspaper might have been confused at the beginning of this month by reports of a new surge of interest in congestion pricing – the practice of charging drivers a fee for entering the most traffic-clogged parts of the city.

The Partnership for New York City, a group of business leaders, released a report that treats the possibility of congestion pricing seriously, Growth or Gridlock: The Economic Case For Traffic Relief and Transit Improvement For Greater New York. They were adding their voice to a swelling chorus. “Congestion pricing," William Neuman had written in the Times a week earlier "has become a kind of holy grail for transportation advocates and urban planners in New York.” The Natural Resources Defense Council is launching a campaign in support of congestion pricing in the city. And officials at City Hall working on a long-range plan for the city acknowledge that traffic reduction is a key issue. Deputy Mayor Daniel Doctoroff was quoted as seeing “the level of congestion as an inhibitor to growth.”

This sounds as if Mayor Michael Bloomberg may be coming around to support for the strategy. And indeed a story in the New York Post on December 5th lead with: “Mayor Bloomberg said for the first time yesterday he's open to charging a fee for driving in Manhattan below 60th Street - but only if city residents are exempt.”

However, on the same day, the headline on a New York Times article proclaimed: “Mayor Says Fee on Peak Traffic Is Not Likely.”

“The politics of a commuter tax in Albany are probably such that we would never get it passed,” Bloomberg was quoted as saying. “And what I want to do is focus on those things that we can get passed to help our city.”

Whether or not congestion pricing is off the table for now, it is unlikely the public debate over it in New York City will disappear -– and that is likely to cause even more confusion. Because, however well-meaning the advocates of congestion pricing, a focus on it could well detour meaningful change in traffic policy.

Make It City-Wide

Congestion pricing would charge drivers for entering such crowded parts of the city as Midtown and lower Manhattan. Proposals to put tolls on the East River bridges, which have been around for decades, could be folded into new approaches made possible by EZPass technology that will allow the city to charge for driving just about anywhere planners want to discourage traffic. As Bruce Schaller pointed out in his March, 2006 Gotham Gazette article, there are many creative ways in which drivers could be charged variable prices for traveling at the most congested times and on the most congested roads. London’s successful use of congestion pricing to reduce downtown traffic is a powerful model that’s hard to ignore. A new report by Schaller, Battling Traffic: What New Yorkers Think, found that the public would accept congestion pricing, or more generally road pricing, “as one feature of a broad plan to improve transportation.”

But there are two big problems with the debate in New York.

The first is that the issue tends to get defined only in terms of reducing traffic in Manhattan below 96th Street.

This guarantees that political opposition from the rest of the city will continue to stop congestion pricing from happening. Congestion pricing is seen as a benefit for Manhattan for which the outer boroughs pay. The debate is but the latest re-play of the decades-long battle to put tolls on the East River bridges. Planners have long recognized the potential for reducing congestion in Manhattan by charging drivers to cross the free bridges, especially during rush hours. But elected officials in Brooklyn, Queens and Long Island have been able to stop every such effort, including a recent one by Mayor Michael Bloomberg. The Queens Chamber of Commerce recently released a report that claims congestion pricing will bring about economic ruin and hurt drivers with modest incomes (ignoring evidence to the contrary, according to Schaller).

The only way around this impasse is to take a hard look city-wide at traffic congestion. Once you get out of Midtown Manhattan you begin to realize that there are congestion nightmares all over. The Brooklyn Queens Expressway, Belt Parkway, Long Island Expressway, Cross Bronx Expressway, Major Deegan, Staten Island Expressway – these head the long list of roadways with chronic congestion, and people who live and work in the outer boroughs are aware of the consequent impacts on health and the environment. Let's figure out how to reduce traffic on these roadways as part of a comprehensive solution for the city as a whole. A recent study by the Tri-State Transportation Campaign (www.tstc.org) found that 45 percent of New Yorkers want stronger measures to reduce traffic. It would be great if Manhattan's workers and tourists could have a better, walkable environment, free from pollution, noise and traffic hazards. But it would be even better if every neighborhood in the city could have it.

Don't Depend On Congestion Pricing Alone

The second problem is the way congestion pricing is being sold as the silver bullet to solve all congestion problems. This ignores, for example, the many other methods used in London to reduce traffic, including

- expanded sidewalk space
- strict parking and truck loading rules
- and better surface transit.

In London, it's not so easy to find a parking space on a downtown street, a factor that discourages many would-be drivers. And trucks can't just park on the street any time of day for as long as they like. Congestion pricing works if it is part of a bundle of policies and practices for reducing traffic.

The fixation on congestion pricing also ignores the dramatic reduction in traffic in other cities that was accomplished without congestion pricing. For example, over a period of 25 years Copenhagen cut traffic congestion by aggressively promoting walking and biking. The city installed a first-class system of bikeways, part of it on pavement that was once used by cars. Selected streets and public plazas in the center of the city were closed to traffic and turned into attractive pedestrian ways. Many other cities in Europe that were once flooded with traffic gradually took back their streets from private vehicles and restored them to the public, producing lively environments and a boom for businesses. Project for Public Spaces has shown some of the methods used in U.S. cities.

The cities that have successfully retreated from life-throttling congestion had strong public authorities that carried out a set of consistent transportation policies over a long period of time. This allowed them to accomplish their goals gradually, by linking them to every capital project and new development, and by changing the way they operate on a daily basis. Many of the cities that have been successful continue to build new mass transit lines, strictly enforce regulations, and incorporate traffic reduction measures in neighborhood renewal projects.

None of this is likely to happen in New York City because there is no policy commitment to reduce traffic in the first place. The Department of Transportation's main goal is to move traffic, not reduce it. There is no clear city policy for improving the pedestrian infrastructure – the thousands of miles of sidewalks. Instead a dozen city agencies apply their own, often conflicting, policies, often making the pedestrian experience a trying one. Improvements in the city's surface transit system are stymied because buses get caught in traffic. And even with new commitments to expand the city's bicycle infrastructure, there's a long way to go before over a third of all commuters use bikes, as they do in Copenhagen. The Citywide Coalition for Traffic Relief, spearheaded by Transportation Alternatives and other advocacy groups, rallied November 14 at City Hall to call for a change in city policy.

In sum, it looks more and more like what's missing in New York City isn't just congestion pricing but long-term planning for traffic reduction. Without taking that first step, individual measures like putting tolls on the East River bridges will collapse before the howls by that small group of drivers who appear to be satisfied with the current state of chaos.

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