

Provocateur

A Convenient Solution to An Inconvenient Truth

THE FIRST HALF OF 2006 SHOWED promise for “Escalade environmentalists” hoping to stave off global warming without lifting a finger. New York City’s joint lawsuit with eight states against CO₂-spewing electric power companies was poised to set a legal framework for capping emissions. In June, City Council announced that City Operations (but certainly not the city as a whole) had met the Kyoto Protocol’s targets for greenhouse gas reductions ahead of schedule, thanks in part to the DOT’s Alternative Fuels Program for city-owned vehicles.

Just when the collective conscience of New York’s car-owning minority could relax (“something is finally being done about global warming!”), commonsense dealt a startling blow. A new study titled “Global Warming on the Road: The Climate Impact of American Automobiles” effectively dismisses global warming initiatives that fail to tackle private auto emissions. Released by Environmental Defense in June, the study estimates the greenhouse gases emitted by our rolling stock of cars are nearly twice those of major electric power companies.

This should actually come as good news, insofar as global warming has good news. The study bolsters more than 250 US cities like New York working to implement Kyoto’s targets. “Beyond its own fleet, city officials have a measure of control over land-use, zoning and development decisions, parking and the availability of non-auto modes of transportation.” The report summarizes, “Such decisions are the clear area in which local governments can affect the ‘rolling carbon’ impacts of their jurisdiction.”

Well-meaning municipalities have nibbled around the edges of their CO₂ problem for years while the federal government failed to act on industry emissions and vehicle fuel standards. As it turns out, the silver bullet to global warming is a tool of local government. Muscular municipalities like New York can reduce demand for driving, effectively slashing the biggest source of emissions. And we can start now.

Mode switching—pushing people from one form of transportation (cars) to another (feet, bicycles or mass transit)—is the key. Every trip we switch from the automobile to a more efficient mode of transit not only reduces the emissions of that trip, it reduces the collective emissions of other vehicles by decreasing congestion.



“Mode switching” decreases “rolling carbon” and allows for the reclamation of public space, as has happened in London’s Trafalgar Square.

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Mayor Bloomberg can start our new mode switching regime by eliminating New York’s most egregious transportation blunder: free parking for government workers (a privilege which incidentally is not included in any binding labor agreement). New York municipal workers commute by car at twice the rate of private sector employees, turning neighborhoods into illegal parking lots in the process. If government workers merely drove to work at the same rate as private sector workers, 19,200 fewer vehicles would be driven to the Manhattan Central Business District each day.

Once we hurdle past parking abuse, we can start taking cues on mode switching from the likes of Portland, Oregon (currently on track to meet Kyoto’s targets of reducing CO₂ emissions to seven percent below 1990 levels by 2012). And it is not just smaller cities like Portland, Chicago’s Mayor Daley recently announced a new initiative to convert five percent of trips under five miles to bicycling. Both cities have recognized that the zero-emission bicycle can replace private autos (especially for trips under three to five miles) and by shifting modes they can maintain transportation sector emissions in the face of population growth.

London has one-upped Portland and Chicago by merging improved bus service and bicycling options with a strong disincentive to drivers. London’s Congestion Charge succeeded in slashing the congestion zone’s traffic CO₂ by 19% between 2003 and 2004 alone.

Congestion pricing came out of an aggressive mode switching strategy begun by Mayor Ken Livingstone to reclaim public space and develop a more sophisticated transportation system.

An equivalent plan for New York is making its way through City Council. Intro 199, the “Traffic Relief Bill” introduced by Councilmember Gale Brewer, would finally require the NYC DOT to adopt targets, strategies and timetables for mode switching.

More than 100 community groups have joined the Citywide Coalition for Traffic Relief, and endorsed a charter calling for a 15% reduction in traffic volumes in New York City by 2009. Few, if any, have done so out of concern for global warming. Most cite their interest in improving public health and safety, enhancing public space and restoring civility to the street. Any politician supporting Intro 199 stands to gain all of these benefits and more.

It is not as if the politics of climate change are paving the way to reform in places like Portland, Chicago and London. They have found the same policies that improve quality of life bear dividends when it comes to CO₂ reduction. It is a convenient solution to the most inconvenient and dangerous situation have ever created. If we just plan for a more livable city, maybe we will not have to try so hard to stop global warming after all.

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