

Sensible Transportation

Transit Lockbox is Key to Congestion Pricing



WILL SHERMAN

Straphangers have to flex their political muscle to make congestion pricing a reality.

You can't lose what you don't know

When asked if they support congestion pricing outright, the average New Yorker says no. When asked if they support congestion pricing to improve mass transit and keep fares low, 60% of New Yorkers say yes. So how do advocates translate the latter group into a fierce pro-pricing, pro-transit lobby? Spreading the word about concrete transit improvements is the surest way to boost support for pricing and put pressure on elected officials. No one wants to be the City Council Member or State Senator who cost his or her district a fleet of new

TO THE AMAZEMENT OF nearly everyone, congestion pricing is still alive and kicking. The proposal to cut traffic and fund transit with an \$8 fee levied on Manhattan-bound drivers survived the eleventh hour brinksmanship in Albany, met the terms of New York's \$354 congestion mitigation grant and satisfied the egos of the "three men in the room" who brokered a deal. Pending review by a 17-member commission this fall, congestion pricing will be voted on by both the City Council and State Legislature by March 2008. Approval means the plan steams forward with better bus service, new ferries plying the East River and the Rockaways, and the installation of the new traffic cameras needed to enforce the congestion zone. A rejection by either legislative body kills the plan.

The legislative maneuvering has pushed back the clock, giving advocates time to make the general "less traffic, better transit" message more specific to local communities. In particular, the NYC DOT and MTA have released detailed plans for how congestion pricing dollars will be allocated. The list of new express bus routes and additional service to existing bus lines is powerful ammunition for congestion pricing advocates trying to make the plan's benefits more concrete to New Yorkers.



KEN COUGHLIN

express buses.

T.A. volunteers are flyering Bay Ridge express bus riders, publicizing the 23 new express buses slated for the neighborhood. Downtown Brooklynites now know about the 33 new buses to be added on the B41 local. And T.A. has presented to community boards in Bayside and Douglaston about their 21 new express buses on three new routes. These on-the-ground efforts will be coupled with an advertising blitz in the weekly local newspapers this winter, hitting neighborhoods in key districts where transit improvements are slated to make a big difference in commuting times.

The message is simple: If opponents of congestion pricing have their way, these improvements vanish. Not only does New York take a pass on \$354 million by voting

down congestion pricing, the long-needed revenue stream for capital projects – new buses, improved train signaling, new ferry slips – disappears.

In neighborhoods where the congestion pricing benefits are not yet specific enough, T.A. is partnering with block associations and business groups to draft lists of necessary transit enhancements. This has proven effective, especially in the Bronx, at bringing potential critics of pricing into the fold. It steers the pricing discussion in precisely the right direction: towards better serving New Yorkers in need of faster, more reliable transit. There is a tremendous opportunity to turn skeptical politicians into crusaders for more subway service and new bus lines.

Lockbox or bust

Above all else, the passage of congestion pricing relies on tapping the latent political muscle of millions of transit-taking New Yorkers. Their support, as it should be, is contingent upon dedicating congestion pricing revenue exclusively to expanding mass transit capacity. Without a guarantee that the \$350 - \$400 million annual net revenue will fund new buses, new trains and increased service, the whole scheme comes crashing down. Gone are the benefits of pricing to the poor and middle class. Gone is the assurance that new buses and ferries will service the thousands of New Yorkers living beyond the reach of the subway.

Mayor Bloomberg initially proposed the S.M.A.R.T. authority to finance major capital projects with congestion pricing dollars. Having met with resistance from state leaders weary of a new appointed authority, the Mayor expressed his openness to considering other solutions. Unfortunately, this has thrown the future of congestion pricing revenue into question.

New Yorkers are all-too-familiar with the precedent of the New York State Lottery. Billions in lottery revenue, intended for education, pass through the state's general coffers and find their way to a host of projects that never touch the state's schools. Without legislation mandating the use of congestion pricing revenue for mass transit capital projects (as opposed to operating costs like labor and maintenance), there is no guarantee that pricing will give New Yorkers better transit. The "Lockbox" is a deal-breaker, and T.A. is maneuvering to ensure its inclusion in the final recommendations of the Congestion Mitigation Commission. □

TakeAction!

Write to your elected officials in the City Council, State Assembly and State Senate to urge the passage of congestion pricing legislation with a lockbox for transit funding.