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Bridge and Tunnel Vision

THEODORE W. KHEEL APRIL 1, 2007

THE three exhibitions on the master builder Robert Moses — at the Museum of the City of New York, the Queens Museum of Art and Columbia University — that are on view in New York City have neglected the mass transit issue almost as seriously as Moses did.

Perhaps Moses was doing what everyone else was doing, or perhaps he was leading the others. But it does a disservice to the region to ignore this piece of the Moses story, which deserves retelling.

It was 1965. Moses' Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority was awash in funds; so was the Port Authority, headed by Austin Tobin. Meanwhile, the Transit Authority was facing a deficit and contemplating increasing the 15-cent fare even as transit workers were demanding higher wages. Moses and Tobin had built empires catering to the automobile; they were not concerned with mass transit's problems.

At the time, I was a contract arbitrator of labor disputes between the Transit Authority and the transport workers union. As someone who knew a great deal about mass transit, I proposed that tolls for the city's bridges and tunnels be doubled, and the proceeds used to subsidize mass transit. If this proposal sounds mundane now, in 1965 it caused a sensation. It was front-page news in all the city's papers. My proposal was labeled ludicrous and reporters speculated that I had gone berserk.

Moses and Tobin, normally archrivals, joined immediately in branding the proposal illegal.

But still, a seed of an idea had been planted, and it slowly grew. Within a few years, tolls were doubled and then tripled, and revenue from the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority was eventually used, in part, to finance mass transit.

Fast forward to the present. Once again a transit problem confronts us, as we face the reality that car congestion is strangling the region's economy, destroying our health and damaging the atmosphere. And once again, a creative solution has been proposed, or rather, a pair of solutions, which — like my two-pronged proposal in 1965 — would turn car drivers' pain into mass transit's gain.

Here are the old ideas in their new clothes. Prong No. 1 is congestion pricing: imposing a fee on cars driven in the city, which would discourage some from driving and raise revenues from those who do. Prong No. 2 is free mass transit: eliminating the bus and subway fare, and using the revenues from congestion pricing to cover the costs. Simple enough — but as strange to our way of thinking as my proposal almost half a century ago.

Here's what people are saying about these ideas.

First, people seem to think congestion pricing is crazy. But congestion pricing is working in cities like London, Melbourne, Rome, Singapore and Stockholm. And there's no reason to think that it can't work here.

What about free transit? I recently financed a \$100,000 study of the benefits of free mass transit, in the belief the benefits would outweigh the costs. Some commentators dismissed the idea as hopelessly utopian — not knowing, perhaps, that only a small part of transit costs are covered today by fares, and that funds from congestion pricing could comfortably replace that amount.

Yet the proposal intrigued people at the same time it surprised them. Newspapers, television stations and public radio picked up the story. One blog described the proliferating discussion as a “free frenzy.”

And that takes me back to Moses and the 1960s. The twin concepts of

congestion pricing and free transit are seedlings, only recently planted. They make too much sense, however, not to take hold.

I predict that 50 years from today, these ideas will seem as mundane as my 1965 suggestion that revenue from Moses' Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority be applied to subsidize mass transit. If, however, we remember what Moses did, perhaps we could move our thinking forward just a little faster. I think we could.

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