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FEB 13 Kheel: Subways should be cheap as free
By Benjamin Kabak

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"Free" is today's subway word of the day.

The free frenzy started last week when Streetsblog reported on a talk by Theodore W. Kheel. Kheel, an environmentalist who just gave \$100,000 to the Institute for Rational Urban Mobility to study his pet project, issued an interesting proclamation: The subways should be free, and drivers should foot the bill for the MTA's upkeep.

Well, today, this news escaped from the world of Streetsblog as The Post and The Sun covered it this morning. The blogs chimed in during the day with SUBWAYblogger voicing support for the project and Brooklyn Record posing a few questions about Kheel's ideas.

Let's dig a little deeper here, and see what Kheel is proposing. For info, we go to The Sun:

“ If New Yorkers don't pay a fee to use the police and fire departments, they should not have to pay to use the city's mass transit system.

That's part of the thinking of Theodore Kheel, who last Thursday donated \$100,000 to the Institute for Rational Urban Mobility to study how a free mass transit system could save money for the city. Mr. Kheel, a 92-year-old philanthropist, environmentalist, and labor relations lawyer, says charging a fee to drive on the city's most crowded streets would create an incentive for drivers to switch to mass transit. The revenue earned on the streets could be used to subsidize free subways and buses.

On the surface, it's an interesting premise. The city over services — such as the police and the fire departments — that we as citizens use for free. Or for "free." The police, the fire department and various other civil organizations are all funded through taxpayer money. Think we're not paying for that? Think again.

The subways too are funded through some taxpayer money (local, state and federal) and some fare money (but, as SUBWAYblogger pointed out, not all fare money goes back to the system). So Kheel wants to charge people more for driving on the crowded city streets, and this money would go toward the subway.

At the event last week, Kheel, as reported on Streetsblog, said that the free subway would save the city some money. The how here is up for debate. Aaron Donovan at Streetsblog speculated, "that savings would come in terms of reduced costs for road maintenance, fewer vehicle accidents and hence emergency services, reduced asthma cases, etc" would save money. I've also heard some people claim that fare collection is costly to the MTA, but I find it hard to believe that even an organization as inefficient as the MTA and New York City Transit would spend more money to collect fares than they would draw in through these fares.

As the cost of driving goes up, Kheel's solution would bring more people into the subway. The subway would then become insanely overcrowded, in my opinion, as many who drive out of luxury would stop doing so and turn to the now-free mass transit options. And here is where I see Kheel's solution breaking down. If fewer people were driving, the revenues drawn in from the increased tolls and new congestions fee would have to off-set a dramatic surge in ridership in the subway. The MTA would need more cars, more maintenance crews, more cleaners and more subway lines. I don't see how a feasible congestion fee can achieve these monetary goals.

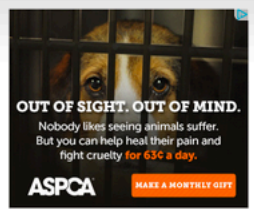
Meanwhile, the local media is already reporting this story incorrectly. At the event last week, Kheel noted that the one-day ridership record set in 1946 stood at 8.8 million. We've come close, but we've yet to eclipse this number. The Sun, reporting on the event, claimed, "In 1943, when the fare was five cents, average weekday ridership was more than 8 million, almost double what it is today."

But the most accurate ridership information I could find (in this PDF presentation) showed an annual ridership of slightly more than 2 billion in 1946, largely considered the busiest year in subway history. That amounts to an average daily ridership of around 5.5 million people. Recently, in September of 2006, just over 5 million people a day rode the subways. We're not that far off from those records.

So for now, this is just a study, but it's a complicated issue. I'll pay attention to it, but I'm skeptical. I'm skeptical of the media coverage of this proposal, and I'm skeptical of its feasibility. I am all for a congestion fee; I'm all for free subways. But the numbers just don't add up.

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