

To tame traffic, make subways & buses free - yes, free

BY TIED KHEEL

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Be Our Guest

As the date approaches for the Traffic Congestion Mitigation Commission to make its recommendations, Mayor Bloomberg's proposal seems to be losing momentum. What was intended as a bold plan to cut traffic is now perceived by some as merely a burdensome new tax.

There's a reason: The mayor's pricing plan - and the three alternate plans being considered at a meeting today - are almost all stick and too little carrot.

For more than half a century, I have tried to focus New Yorkers' attention on the fact that car travel and mass transit are two halves of a whole, the yin and yang of traffic. You can't consider one without the other.

Bloomberg's plan ignores this principle. It proposes an \$8 charge on motor vehicles entering Manhattan south of 86th St., but says nothing about the price of mass transit. Yet both affect congestion.

I recently presented an alternative plan to the Congestion Mitigation Commission that harnesses both types of pricing to achieve traffic mitigation. It's a bolder plan, with a bigger stick - but even more importantly, an enormous carrot. My plan would double Bloomberg's cordon fee to \$16 and use the revenues (along with taxi fare surcharges and higher curbside parking fees) to eliminate - now and forever - all fares charged on bus, subway and rail travel within New York City.

You heard right: charge drivers more, and make public transit free.

As shown by an analysis by a team of traffic experts, the benefits of my plan would be dramatic. With more people taking advantage of free transit, traffic would fall by a quarter in Manhattan's most congested area, the Central Business District, and by nearly a tenth citywide. New Yorkers would save a staggering \$4 billion in recovered productivity (time that would otherwise have been spent languishing in traffic) and another \$2 billion in savings associated with reduced pollution, fewer auto crashes and lower insurance costs.

With a \$16 congestion pricing fee, a typical 12-minute taxi trip in the heart of midtown Manhattan would be trimmed to nine minutes, while five minutes would be shaved from the typical 55-minute ride for a trip outside the Central Business District, say from Bayside to Bensonhurst. And with the elimination of MetroCards, boarding will be faster, especially for bus riders.

Less traffic would also open up road capacity and public space - the equivalent in acreage to two dozen new Madison Square Parks or High Lines - for bus and bicycle lanes, widened sidewalks and public plazas.

Congestion pricing has been adopted in cities across Europe such as London, Stockholm and Milan, and it is widely viewed by transit experts as the essential step in fighting traffic congestion. In New York, it has garnered support from environmentalists, major business interests and some labor unions. But it has not yet caught the public's imagination here the way it should.

The way to fix this is shown by a recent poll. A majority of voters said they didn't favor congestion pricing, but reversed their vote when asked if they would favor such a policy if it prevented a fare hike. Evidently, the public grasps what the experts do not: congestion pricing alone is not enough; it needs real fare relief to really work a change. Combine both ingredients and you will see a transformation - in the public's attitude as well as the city's landscape.

Will a plan that makes transit free require time to realize? Most certainly. But that's not an argument for delay, it's an argument for starting right away.

As Chicago architect Daniel Burnham once wrote, "Make no little plans. They have no magic to stir men's blood. Make big plans; aim high in hope and work."

Let's aim high. Let's replace our unsustainable, car-centric clog with a better-functioning balance of automobiles and public transportation that can reinvigorate New York as a place to live and work.

Kheel is a labor negotiator, lawyer and founder of Nurture New York's Nature.

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