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Free Transit For All?

ERICA BARNETT, 11 JAN 08



A group called the Nurture Nature Foundation, founded by New York labor lawyer and negotiator Ted Kheel, will soon release a study showing how New York's subways and buses could be free. The tradeoff? Making auto trips into central Manhattan more expensive—much more expensive. Under Kheel's proposal, the city would levy a \$16 tax to enter the city's Central Business District, higher parking fees in the central city, and a taxi surcharge. Kheel believes that increasing the cost of driving in the central city would decrease traffic by a third or more and produce \$2 billion in benefits from pollution reductions and other savings. New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg's congestion pricing plan, in contrast, would charge lower fees—between four and eight dollars; an alternative proposal currently under discussion would charge commuters \$8 round-trip tolls on some city bridges. Kheel says congestion pricing is a good start, but without mass transit, he believes, it won't work. His preliminary study suggests that subway and commuter rail trips would increase by 20 percent under his proposal.

Free transit sounds like a nutty plan, but remember that not so long ago, so did congestion pricing—and it's being implemented in cities from New York to London to Stockholm. Moreover, as we've written, the idea of tolls to pay for transit service is hardly controversial; making transit free takes the idea one step further, but maybe it's a positive step. We know that ridership spikes when transit is free in the San Francisco Bay Area, for example, free rides on smoggy Spare the Air Days caused transit ridership to skyrocket, prompting calls to make the system free all the time. If public officials and citizen activists could come up with a realistic, workable plan to pay for additional service for those new riders, it's hard to see why they shouldn't try.

Few cities actually offer free transit (Staten Island, New York, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and Lubben, Germany are among the exceptions), although some, like Seattle, do make bus service free in the city center. But arguments over whether transit should be free have raged pretty much since the dawn of transit itself. The Tyee, a newspaper in British Columbia, ran a five-part series last year that made the case for making transit free. Among their reasons: Free transit would make transit service available to every member of the community, free transit would eliminate the inequity produced by invisible subsidies for auto travel; it would reduce oil use and greenhouse-gas emissions produced by cars; and it would reduce the need for private parking in cities.

And the best argument for free transit may be philosophical. As Kheel's study concludes, "As a society, we have chosen to make schools, police, and fire protection free because they are 'public goods' whose universal use benefits everyone. That's equally true of transit, and it's time to manage it that way."

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COMMENTS

The Scottish socialist party tried pushing this idea at the last election. Personally, I think it's a wonderful notion and one well worth looking in to further.

They produced two charming, very short, films on the issues here

<http://www.scottishsocialistparty.info/2007/04/ssp-election-broadcast.html>

and here

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qD-hAuCDBLA>

As Ken Macleod said, "You can disagree completely with the policy and still find yourself smiling."

POSTED BY: EDWARD PARSONS ON 12 JAN 08

Subsidizing public transit with private vehicle fees is a great concept in principle, kind of like the tax shifting that so many ecological economists propose.

In the specific instance of NYC, however, increasing public transit ridership is often more a matter of adding excess capacity rather than lowering car use. Many subway lines are at or nearing maximum ridership during peak hours, and accomodating an entire city of (free) transit riders would probably take a far bigger capital investment than congestion pricing and other fees can provide.

POSTED BY: ADAM EPOCH ON 12 JAN 08

Interesting to me that they only suspect that it would increase public transit by 20%. This is the first thing that came to my mind after reading: http://www.theworldsbestever.com/2008/01/most_horrible_commute.php

I know telling people that riding a bus like I do actually saves you about \$100/month in gas is a pretty big selling point after they complain about how big of a hassle it would be to them. Great idea, great article.

POSTED BY: CHRIS FITTER ON 13 JAN 08

I think this is a sensational idea!

Sadly, in my part of the country, there is no public transit, free or not, available. Well, I should correct myself. There is the Arrowhead Bus service. However, they're a lot more like a taxi service. You call, and the bus picks you up. Hardly public transit.

My feeling is that if bigger cities such as New York, Seattle, etc., have free public transit, that will be one step closer to public transit in rural areas such as the Iron Range. And to be honest, that could only help communities to be better.

I could get into global warming, protecting the environment, etc. But I'll spare everyone, because I could go on for ages, and it could get ugly.

POSTED BY: RACHELON ON 13 JAN 08

Adam:

As you'll notice in the preliminary Kheel report, there is a section on Handling the Anticipated Increase in Ridership:

Preliminary figures in the study place the expected s well in subway trips into the Central Business District at 343,000 new riders per day — a 20% increase over the current weekday average of 1,736,000. Yet, current crowding notwithstanding, we find that the increase could be accommodated with 15% more space per passenger than the MTA service criterion, for the following reasons.

First, much of the increase in ridership would occur off-peak (discretionary off-peak travel is more price-sensitive than on-peak) when the existing system as currently operated generally has spare capacity. Even during the peak hour, 8-9 a.m., the subway lines have capacity to absorb additional riders, or could do so by adding trains within the feasible operating track capacities of each route. While 447 additional cars would be needed to accommodate the added 28,000 riders, these could be provided by retaining, not scrapping, the best existing cars as new cars on order are delivered. A total of 188 additional new cars are already budgeted.

Second, fortuitously, the most crowded subway lines originate in corridors served by commuter rail lines which could be operated to attract in-city riders, thereby freeing up capacity for subway riders closer to the core. Both commuter railroads serving the Manhattan core from the north and east — Metro-North and the L.I.R.R. — have considerable unused seats during the morning peak. Moreover, both lines have the track capacity to operate additional trains, using rolling stock that is available today or could be made available within 18 months.

We estimate that 26,000 peak-hour subway riders could relocate to parallel commuter rail lines, and would likely do so, provided that in-city rail trips are discounted in tandem with subway trips. Our calculations show an additional 5,000 current peak-hour subway riders living close to the CBD would be expected to switch to bicycle-commuting, freeing up even more space for the new straphangers lured (or tolled) out of automobiles.

POSTED BY: DANIEL B. SIMON ON 13 JAN 08

In Melbourne and Sydney recently, there has been much controversy of their existing rail systems due to aging infrastructure, aging trams/trains and a timetable/management system that has not kept up to date with passenger loads. One solution being touted - as an interim to more trains being purchased - in Melbourne is for free rides for commuters who take trains prior to 7am. With more CBD-based companies offering flexible working hours (i.e. 7-3 instead of 9-5) this option becomes attractive.

Just goes to show there are Limits to Growth, and that sometimes being smarter and more efficient is better than increasing capacity.

POSTED BY: BOND ON 13 JAN 08

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