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A CLIMATE FOR OLD MEN

Spearheading transit for livable cities at 93

BY Charles Komanoff
11 FEB 2008 11:18 AM

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I recently ended 100 days without Grist. And wouldn't you know, the title of the first post I saw, "No climate for old men," spoke directly to the reason I was away.

No, I wasn't with the McCain campaign. Rather, I was immersed in a project, spearheaded by a really old man, that could become a terrific tool for beating back the climate crisis.

That man is 93-year-old Ted Kheel, legendary New York labor-lawyer-turned-environmentalist. His project is a study of the feasibility of financing free mass transit in New York City through congestion pricing and other charges on driving.

- twenty-five percent less traffic within the Manhattan core, and 9 percent less citywide
• an increase in person-traffic, as growth in transit trips more than offsets the drop in auto trips
• less-crowded transit, as some current subway riders shift to biking (helped by less traffic) and parallel bus and commuter rail routes (made free and faster)
• huge gains in recovered productivity from saving over a hundred million "vehicle hours" a year that are now wasted in traffic
• an annual revenue infusion of almost half a billion dollars to upgrade and expand transit
• vast new public space in the heart of the city (from reserving half of the new "traffic lanes" effectively minted by the traffic reduction)
• environmental and health benefits from decreased driving and increased walking and bicycling.

Helping build these impressive benefits is a set of gorgeous synergies, like this one involving transit buses: under the Kheel Plan, as we call it, when you get on a bus, you don't have to pay a fare. Not only is that nice for you, but it speeds up everybody's ride -- no more fumbling at the door for your fare card. This in turn makes the buses more attractive to people who might otherwise drive or take cabs, which makes for less traffic, which speeds bus travel and attracts still more riders.

Ah, the numbers. The mammoth job of putting them together is what forced me off Grist (and other fun stuff) for months. To trace the simultaneous impacts of free transit and driving fees, we built an ingenious computer model that accounts for interactions between traffic volumes and speeds, and captures the effect of price changes and time savings on travel choices (transit, auto, taxi, and bike).

While this work was going on, we were racing the clock. As even many non-New Yorkers know, last year Mayor Michael Bloomberg proposed his own milder congestion pricing plan (\$8 car entry fee instead of our \$16; no letup in transit fare hikes), touching off a legislative forced march to satisfy a federal funding deadline.

What does the Kheel Plan have to do with rescuing the climate? Not what you might think -- the direct CO2 savings from the drop in driving are modest, just a few percent of total citywide emissions.

I turned 60 last year. Once or twice, contemplating the climate crisis, I've had to pull myself back from thinking, "At least I won't be around when it all hits the fan." But here's Ted Kheel, burning through his 90s, pouring heart and soul into a vision that he may not be around to see made real.

Maybe the climate is something for old men after all.

To download the Kheel Report and spreadsheet, go to www.nynj.org/kheelplan.

Charles is an activist, energy-economist and policy-analyst. He "re-founded" NYC's bike-advocacy group Transportation Alternatives in the 1980s, helped found the Tri-State Transportation Campaign and Right of Way in the 1990s, and co-founded the Carbon Tax Center in 2007.

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Liz Borkowski 11 FEB 2008 5:14AM
transportation for old men (and women) And for those who've reached the age when driving is difficult or inadvisable, public transit can help them remain mobile and independent.

johnmcc793 11 FEB 2008 9:47PM
Urban Legend Charlie, great piece of work. This should be a no-brainer for NYC. Congratulations. You are now, also, an urban legend. John McCormick

NBKBoston 13 FEB 2008 12:48AM
Ah... the model (count parking costs!) enjoyed reading the report and playing with the model -- reminded me a little of playing with SimCity when I was younger. But there is a flaw in the model which I think undermines some of its key conclusions -- especially the conclusion that enough revenue can be raised through its basket of proposals to replace the mass transit fairbox.

There are two ways the parking reform element increases parking costs on drivers. The first is that increasing the per-hour rate, and the number of spaces governed by meters, takes money from motorists and gives it to the government. This is estimated at \$700m/year in the budgeting section of the model, which amounts to roughly \$3 per trip, on average, for current traffic volumes -- a bit more if volumes fall on the increased cost. If you counted this extra cost into the total price per trip (which you haven't), the elasticity of demand says that you'd have fewer trips, lower toll revenues, and less money for the subways. That's problem one, and it is only of moderate size. The second way in which the parking reform element affects total trip costs is significantly larger. With the ...read more

Charles Komanoff 14 FEB 2008 5:59AM
Author responds to Boston spreadsheet devotee Hey NBKBoston -- Thanks for your terrific comment. We're thrilled that you dug deep into the BTA (our spreadsheet model), and we appreciate (and are impressed) that you spotted a flaw in it and took the trouble to point it out.

Yes, we did err by taking "revenue credit" for parking fees without reflecting their price-impact on the number of tolled trips and, hence, on toll revenues. That's a classic case of double-counting that we missed in our rush to crunch the numbers and get the report out.

But I differ with you on the magnitude of the impact. As you can see by running the BTA, adding \$3 to the average cost of a CBD trip (as you did, by allocating the \$700M in new parking revenue across the number of such trips) would eliminate just 7% of current car trips into the CBD (48,500 daily out of 690,000 -- excludes taxis). That in turn reduces the revenue we projected from automobiles, \$2,264M, by 7%, or \$160M per year. While that's not insignificant, it still leaves 2/3 of our net revenues available for transit.

Moreover, I think a case can be made that even the 7% may err on the high side, since some of that \$700M in revenue would derive from trucks rather than autos. (I didn't find your garage scenario persuasive, BTW, for reasons I'd be happy to spell out at another time.)

We're committed to integrating parking charges into the demand analysis, as part of a comprehensive upgrade of our model. "BTA 2.0" ...read more

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