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March 6, 2008

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Editorial comment: Is there such a thing as a free ride?

1 2 [Next page >](#)

Ted Kheel has a long memory. He remembers the days when he could leave his house on West 246th Street in Fieldston, walk a couple of blocks to the subway at Van Cortlandt Park and ride to his downtown office for a nickel.

Mr. Kheel remembers that 60 years ago, when he was negotiating a pay raise for subway workers on behalf of the Transport Workers Union, he scoffed at the argument that a small fare increase to pay for the raises would result in falling ridership. And he remembers with some chagrin how wrong he was.

On Monday, Dec. 23, 1946, 8,872,244 riders made their way through the subway's turnstiles; today ridership stands at 4,900,000 each weekday.

And that was before fares went up on Monday, for the 17th time since 1948.

For some time, Mr. Kheel has been trying to atone for the mistake he made six decades ago. At 93, he has become a leading environmentalist. He gave his Fieldston home to his Nurture Nature Foundation, which used a portion of the proceeds from its sale to produce what it calls its "bolder plan" to reduce traffic congestion.

Released in January, the 52-page report does what Mayor Michael Bloomberg's proposal to charge drivers who bring cars into Manhattan fails to do. It offers commuters an incentive, along with the congestion pricing penalty. It calls for eliminating fares on subways, buses and commuter trains.

The impact, the plan predicts, would be to boost the use of public transportation to get to and from Manhattan by nearly 18 percent, while cutting automobile trips to the central business district by a quarter and citywide by 9 percent.

Skeptical? You can read the plan at www.nyn.org/kheelplan, and can test other fares and fees by using the interactive spreadsheet called the "Balanced Transportation Analyzer," which is found on the site.

The subways would not grow more crowded at rush hours, the plan argues. Some riders would switch to buses. They would get to their destinations faster on less crowded streets and because boarding would not be slowed by the fare box. (A typical, hour-long Riverdale express bus ride would be reduced to 48 minutes, the plan predicts.)

1 2 [Next page >](#)

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[< Previous page](#) 1 2

(Page 2 of 2)

Other riders would switch to Metro-North or the LIRR. With less traffic, streets would also beckon more commuters to try cycling. (Revenues from the \$16 toll on drivers entering the central business district would also provide 400 additional subway cars, and would pay for additional security on trains.)

The Kheel plan has its imperfections. Like the mayor's, it relies on the calculations of a business group to assert that the cost of congested streets is \$13 billion annually. That's a number that has been cooked more thoroughly than the vegetables in an English dinner.

As Paul Moses of the Center for the Study of Brooklyn has pointed out, the figure, which is cited over and over by proponents of congestion pricing, isn't for New York City, but for the entire metropolitan area, and it relies on some pretty iffy assumptions.

For example, among the calculations used by the business group and adopted by the Kheel plan is that traffic jams cost billions in lost productivity. But that calculation is based on assigning a cost of \$30 an hour to sitting in traffic. Try telling your boss that \$30 an hour is the going wage for working in Manhattan.

Nevertheless, the ruling assumption of the Kheel plan is dead-on: that transit, like schools, police and fire protection is "a public good," and like schools, police and fire protection should be paid for by all, and not just by users.

The ruling metaphor of the Kheel plan - offering the carrot along with the stick - remedies the most glaring defect of the Bloomberg plan. The mayor makes no more than an empty promise of improvements to the mass transit system. His proposal threatens to become the same kind of shell game as the promise that lottery money will be dedicated to education.

And Mr. Bloomberg focuses on the benefits of congestion pricing for visitors to and residents and businesses of Manhattan.

The Kheel plan gives the people who have the most to lose from congestion pricing - those of us who live outside Manhattan - something in exchange. Save us time and money, and the opposition to new tolls just might evaporate.

[< Previous page](#) 1 2

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