



ACTIVIST IN RESIDENCE

Bill McKibben

tackles the congestion pricing issue by offering an unexpected alternative: free public transit for all

When proposed change runs into strong resistance, we usually say it's because the idea is overly ambitious or it's gone too far. But sometimes it's because it hasn't gone far enough.

Consider New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg's controversial plan to charge automobile drivers entering Manhattan south of 86th Street during major business hours an \$8 congestion pricing fee (\$21 for large trucks). Modeled after a system in place in London, the proposal for New York is an excellent effort to reduce traffic, and hence cut down on some of the environmental and economic costs arising from gridlock. New York's state assembly rejected the plan in April, but most believe New Yorkers haven't heard the last of congestion pricing.

Now consider a much-discussed alternative, proposed by famed New York labor mediator and environmental advocate Theodore W Kheel: Double that fee for cars driving into Manhattan south of 60th Street (and raise it to \$32 for commercial vehicles). And then use the extra revenue to make subways and buses free for everyone in the five boroughs. Drivers might howl twice as hard, but at least there'd be someone howling back on the other side—someone who wanted to ride the bus for no charge.

Ninety-four-year-old Kheel commissioned a team led by veteran environmental analyst Charles Komanoff to study the free-transit plan, and a half-year of intensive work produced a massive spreadsheet called the Balanced Transportation Analyzer (BTA). (Both the Kheel Plan and the BTA are available at nyn.org/kheelplan.) "When we started, I thought the idea was nutty," Komanoff recalls. "I thought, how could you give up the fare box?" Instead, Komanoff's data revealed some pretty startling discoveries.

In Kheel's report, the city would raise taxi fares by 25 percent, with all extra money going to support public transit. With less congested streets, the analysis calculates, the average cabbie would make 37 runs a



shift instead of 31. Transaction-free bus rides could result in a 20 percent reduction of route time, leading to an effective 25 percent growth of each fleet because drivers could make more runs per shift. The city would also triple the price of streetside parking in Manhattan south of 96th Street, making it about the same as the private parking garages. "There are parts of the city where a quarter or more of drivers are simply looking for a parking spot," says Komanoff.

All told, when you add up the numbers, 2.4 percent more people would enter Manhattan south of 60th Street every day. But the number coming by car would drop by a quarter, and the number traveling by bus, bike, or subway would rise dramatically. Across the entire city, automobile travel would drop by 9 percent.

Obviously, neither Bloomberg's plan nor Kheel's radical alternative is an easy sell. Some opponents raise practical difficulties—swamped subways, for instance. But by using Kheel's reasonable projections for the parallel commuting methods that would be available if road traffic were to decrease, Komanoff found that only 211 additional subway cars would be needed during peak hours. That might sound like a

lot, but it's actually 64 fewer than are called for to address existing overcrowding.

In a sense, the sides in the congestion pricing battle are divided by class. Well-off commuters who tie up the city's traffic because they need or want to travel alone and on a personal schedule are pitted against residents who are willing to submit to public transit or can't afford to do otherwise. But a New York free-transit plan could have a broader and more enduring significance: As a microcosm, it helps illustrate the sort of shifts rich nations like the United States will have to make in the next decade to accommodate, say, the growth in energy demand in places like India and China. Our world will soon be one in which those who pollute more per capita will have to start paying for it. That, it seems, will be our future cost of living—and it will be a lot easier to swallow if some things come for free. ❖

Bill McKibben is the author of The End of Nature, Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future, and others. He is the recipient of the 2000 Lannan Literary Award for nonfiction, and founder of Step It Up, an organization whose nationwide day of climate change protest in 2007 (stepitup2007.org) is considered the largest to date in the US.