
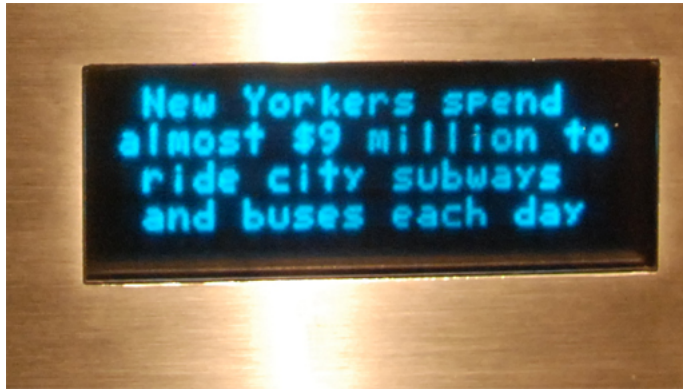


STREETS BLOG

"Kheel Plan II" to Revive Free Transit Proposal for '09 Races

By Charles Komanoff | Jun 2, 2008 |  26



"In for a penny, in for a pound" is how the Brits express what we Americans less elegantly call "the whole hog": why do something halfway when you might as well go all the way?

That's the thinking behind [Ted Kheel's free-transit proposal](#). If an \$8 congestion fee, as unsuccessfully proposed recently by Mayor Bloomberg, infuriated drivers, Kheel reasons, then let's go the whole hog and charge \$16 to drive into Manhattan. Drivers are already as mad as they're going to get about *any* congestion charge. With \$16, we won't stir up twice as many hornets, but we'll raise twice the revenue — enough to finance universal free transit throughout the five boroughs and disarm the [faux-populists](#) who sank Mayor Bloomberg's more modest plan.

In retrospect, it seems clear that Bloomberg's plan appeared to too many people to be "all stick." There wasn't enough direct and concrete payoff, for anybody, to attract wide public support. The Kheel Plan remedies this defect with the very considerable, tangible, obvious "carrot" of free transit.

I was lead analyst and author of [Kheel's January report](#) that first proposed this idea. As renowned environmental writer Bill McKibben tells it in an article in the [current Plenty magazine](#), I initially thought Kheel's idea of zeroing out farebox revenues was nutty. I quickly came around, however, drawn not just by visions of free transit and much less traffic but by the plan's gorgeous synergies, such as this one for free buses: making bus-boarding fare-free speeds bus service which expands bus patronage which reduces driving which speeds bus service even more which further reduces driving.

Alas, the Kheel Plan surfaced too late to figure in the congestion pricing debate. But Kheel is unwavering. With an eye on next year's municipal elections, he has commissioned me and programmer Michael Smith to upgrade the labyrinthine spreadsheet I created for his free-transit plan — the [Balanced Transportation Analyzer](#).

The new computer model, BTA 2.0, will enable us — and everyone with a PC or Mac — to examine pricing scenarios that lay beyond the reach of the original spreadsheet, to wit:

- *Time-variable congestion fees*: instead of being locked into a straight \$16 fee 24-7, we'll assess higher peak-periods fees along with offsetting, lower fees when traffic is light.
- *Time-variable subway fares*: we'll test retaining the fare during the a.m. peak as a possible transition strategy to ease subway crowding and improve system efficiencies (buses will be free 24-7, regardless).
- Closer integration of *parking pricing* with road pricing.
- *Possible differential tolls into the Central Business District* by "portal" (New Jersey vs. Long Island vs. Bronx/Westchester).

- *Intra-Manhattan congestion charging*: according to some [GPS developers](#), it may soon be possible to charge per-mile or per-minute for driving *within* the CBD; this would open the door to even more revenue and less traffic and further dispel the rap on congestion pricing as a giveaway to Manhattan.



Our plan is to roll out BTA 2.0 in early fall and offer a new and irresistible free transit + congestion pricing proposal, “Kheel Plan 2,” that can become a central issue in the 2009 mayoral and City Council races.

I'll be discussing the old and new versions of the BTA on Tuesday at the monthly [NYMTC brown bag lunch](#). NYMTC is the [regional transportation planning agency](#), and my appearance Tuesday is a sign of both the BTA's potential value as a public planning tool and of NYMTC's evolving openness to new ideas. The focus will be on analysis rather than politics, but anyone who'd like to peer under the hood of this exciting work-in-progress is encouraged to attend.

Photo: [gothamistllc / Flickr](#)

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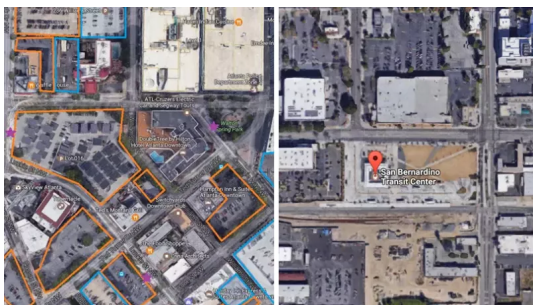


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jollyroger · 9 years ago

In mass transit you are considered a managerial genius if you get 45% of your operating costs from the farebox.

In return we impose choke points on the boarding process so we can extract this chump change.

The Muni through Chinatown moves 20 seconds, boards 120 seconds (yes, I've checked).

The "crime issue" is preposterous. Criminals don't worry about fares, they jump turnstiles, board the bus in back, etc.

Spare the Air ride free days dramatically increased ridership. (Apparently, mass transit only involves disgusting inter-class contact when it is not free...).

The imputed income of traffic reduction is enormous, let alone the value to you personally when your ambulance gets you to the ER before your brain is dead from that stroke you're planning for.

^ | ▾ · Reply · Share ▸



paulb · 9 years ago

Free public transit would be an amazing thing for the tourism business, which seems to be a bigger and bigger part of the NYC economy each day.

I just want to observe, not necessarily stating my own opinion, that many of my local (Brooklyn) acquaintances--born NYers to a person--have come to look at big transit projects like the SAS as huge boondoggles and are very very cynical about them, and I'm not sure how they'd feel about an enormous tax on the use of private transportation that will direct more of their \$\$ at what they consider an incompetently run utility that's inefficient at running transportation but quite efficient at squandering public money in what they view as a gigantic patronage system.

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Kamal · 9 years ago

Re: 'have to wait until the public support congestion pricing'

The experience in Stockholm and London was that congestion charging is unpopular until it starts ... and then as soon as starts, voters see the benefit, and ask to keep it.

^ | ▾ · Reply · Share ▸



mike · 9 years ago

Ignore them. They can't even get their basic facts straight, and don't seem interested in remedying this. Not worth the time to engage them, in my view.

^ | ▾ · Reply · Share ▸



Mike D. · 9 years ago

The wingnuts are at it again, and make direct reference to this post!

<http://www.commuteroutrage...>

"If people adopt mass transit or bicycle commutes because you ratchet up the costs until automobiles aren't affordable, you haven't proven that people prefer those methods you advocate."

Honestly, where do these guys find the time...

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Chris H · 9 years ago

What is the fare infrastructure cost operating for the subways? With the buses, wouldn't off-board fare collection accomplish largely the same goals?



^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Felix · 9 years ago

The problem with a reduced fare is that it will still cost a lot to collect on the subway and slow down the bus. Maybe it would be better to eliminate on and keep the other intact, if a compromise is necessary.

It seems to me, though, that now is not the time to talk compromise. Free transit is an idea that can capture people's imaginations and spur debate. We need to push it as far and wide as possible.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Chris H · 9 years ago

Increasing mass transit ridership is important but the condition of the infrastructure of the MTA should be a higher priority. Rather eliminate the fare, it would be more advantageous to put the money into upgrading existing infrastructure and expanding the reach of the system.

Cutting the fare to 50% rather than to 0% makes \$1.66 billion available vs. \$460 million under the Kheel plan. Considering the sheer magnitude of infrastructure upgrades that the MTA needs, I don't think that there could ever be **enough** funding.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Benjamin Kabak · 9 years ago

Increasing mass transit ridership is important but the condition of the infrastructure of the MTA should be a higher priority. Rather eliminate the fare, it would be more advantageous to put the money into upgrading existing infrastructure and expanding the reach of the system.

The Kheel Plan is written in such a way that the money collected from congestion pricing would all go toward infrastructure improvements and capital expansion plans for the MTA. The economics of it, if you believe Kheel's baseline assumptions, would provide for a far healthier MTA — at least in economic terms — than the one we have now.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



fpteditors · 9 years ago

Re #10. You have to separate accounting from economics. In accounting, fares bring in money. In economic terms, they are a tariff subsidy (by deterrent) to the carbon-auto industry.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Chris H · 9 years ago

My biggest issue with the Kheel plan is that I don't think it deals with the biggest issues that we need to deal with. Increasing mass transit ridership is important but the condition of the infrastructure of the MTA should be a higher priority. Rather eliminate the fare, it would be more advantageous to put the money into upgrading existing infrastructure and expanding the reach of the system.

For example, the current plan is to make 100 stations ADA compliant by 2020. The infusion of capital would speed along this process.

Also AFAICT, the bsa does not seem to take into the account the impact on ridership and economic/social benefits of expanding the reach of the subway system.

I would be in favor of a reduction in fare but not a total elimination.

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Slopion · 9 years ago

I'd love to see this attempted. Further, I think you're dead-on with the carrot-stick analysis. Sticks don't have much appeal beyond those (e.g., those here) who are already fervently pro-transit and dedicated to reducing driving. Everyone else, entirely reasonably wants to know what's *definitely* in it for them, and I can't blame peeeople who were skeptical of the estimated reductions in pollutions and promised eventual improvements in transit (from the MTA, no less) under the old plan.

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Larry Littlefield · 9 years ago

I'd rather let the CP turndown be the game changer, and start treating the "free" drivers the way the "free" transit riders would be treated. You get what you pay for, and we are taking space away.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Charles Komanoff · 9 years ago

Re Crime: The big drop in citywide auto traffic under the Kheel Plan (we estimate 9%) would result in a proportionate drop in traffic crashes that could allow some police reassignment to subway patrolling. It would be good to know the number of personnel, and I'll start the tortuous process of finding out.

To Paul: If you're still nursing wounds from the lost fight, I sympathize. Now it's time to ditch incremental politics and change the paradigm. I refer you to the Shoup quote about the politics of c.p. in our January (Kheel I) report: "The dilemma confronting congestion pricing is not that opposition is too high, but that support is too low." While we intend to try to win over the opposition by convincingly demonstrating the travel time savings from a big congestion charge, our focus will be on galvanizing support via the carrot of free transit. That's the game-changer.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Red · 9 years ago

In London, youth crimes rose by 55% after the institution of free bus fares for riders under the age of 16:



<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/...>

Most other press accounts of crime and free transit are pretty sketchy on the details, and the above article didn't include stats on ridership (did youth ridership also increase 55%?). Either way it looks like a relationship that should be investigated - and someone is going to bring it up if free transit becomes debated.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



rhubarbpie · 9 years ago

On the crime side, I would think having more people on the subways would mostly serve to reduce crime (though maybe not pick-pocketing), since criminals typically like to do their work without people watching. (I say "typically" since Urbanis does refer to criminal activity taking place while others were watching. This does happen in the subways, but likely would decrease if the subways were less crowded.

Some of the fare-collection infrastructure might go in a free system, but I think it'd be a foolish move to get rid of booth attendants (or whatever they are called these days), who give out information and provide a quick link to authorities. They help do the same thing an increase in the number of riders would do, provide eyes and ears that reduce crime.

Chances are the MTA would also want to maintain a way of counting passengers, and keep the physical turnstiles up too on the chance that the free system would end.

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Larry Littlefield · 9 years ago

I feel no need to repeat myself, but I think it would be great if transit covered all its costs.

We have the highest state and local taxes in the country, and soaring debt service, pension and health care costs. Any public service that is not self-funding is vulnerable to ongoing quality of service deterioration, unless it has people who matter (like retired senior citizens) behind it. Without the fare, transit's fate would be entirely in the hands of placard holders who don't rely on it at all.

Richard Trumka, former head of the United Mine Workers, once served on a blue ribbon commission on the Social Security problem but refused to endorse the majority conclusion, which was to means test it. That would turn it into a "welfare" program, he said, and you know how people feel about those.

The best argument for the Kheel plan is the die is cast and transit service is bound to collapse anyway, particularly after the 20/50 pension plan is passed (followed by the 15/45). But if you don't believe that, you ought to want to keep the fare

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Urbanis · 9 years ago

I'm not convinced the crime issue is entirely bogus. I normally don't worry about my safety on the subway and I ride it at ALL hours, but I have witnessed on at least one occasion (within the past two years) a group of tough-looking guys get on, harrass a few riders in the car, and kick a window (cracking it). I wasn't about to intervene as they could have easily taken me down.

Also, ridership is at an all-time high and there are plenty of people on the subway late nights and yet I still see signs of vandalism on cars, so the deterrent is not 100% effective.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



da · 9 years ago

The crime/vandalism issue is bogus.

The increased ridership that would presumably result from eliminating fares would provide more "eyes on the trains" and would deter crime and vandalism, not increase it.

Kheel Plan II is brilliant.

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fpteditors · 9 years ago

This whole issue of crime shows a class bias. The people for whom fares are real money, the working poor, would welcome the new mobility to escape high crime areas and get to better jobs more easily. To get free transit we will have to get their support. Many politicians covet such power, but fear its exercise.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



fpteditors · 9 years ago

Lowering fares and eliminating fares are as different as night and day. Even if fares were 1 cent, there would still be a collection infrastructure and the annoying impediments.

The main purpose of fares: hobble transit administration, annoy and delay those who can afford them, discourage those who cannot. So a 1 cent fare would still accomplish 2 of 3.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Urbanis · 9 years ago

Charles K, I love the overall idea of free mass transit, and it makes a great deal of sense economically, but I share Christopher's concern in #1 that it may make the subway system more prone to crime and vandalism (buses having the driver in the vehicle are less prone to that sort of thing). What would you propose to mitigate that risk? Could some of the money saved from fare-collecting be put towards, say, having an MTA employee sit in ear

car to keep an eye on things?

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



fpteditors · 9 years ago

Bill Mckibbin finally "gets it." Wow. It is sad how the so-called "environmentalists" are trailing so far behind the practical transit advocates.

Crime? What about the crime of stealing trillion-dollar subsidies from the public and using it to fight over oil and destroy the biosphere? Who is accountable for the deaths caused by climate change?

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Benjamin Kabak · 9 years ago

Well, Paul, that's the biggest obstacle to the Kheel plan. I too was originally skeptical of the plan, but after reading what Kheel had to say and reading through their report, I came around big time. The only problem is that it's just not politically feasible until the public understands and supports congestion pricing by an overwhelming majority. Economically, it makes sense, but it's nearly political suicide unless it can be turned into a populist crusade in the positive sense of things.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



paul · 9 years ago

with so many elected officials fighting to make driving _cheaper_ in this era of high gas prices, how is a \$16 fee even remotely possible? wouldn't it be smarter to promote a more modestly priced, variable and modern charging system? once this system is in place, then it would be easier to push a more equitable driving and transit pricing balance.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Christopher · 9 years ago

I'm all for lowering the price of transit, but I believe that free transit is often shown to increase crime. Perhaps counter intuitive, but maybe not. I know that in the Bay Area during the Spare the Air days of free transit, muggings and robberies go up as criminals now can travel farther and easier than they could before. Perhaps that would even out if it was an every day occurrence (actually, it would most definitely), but it is something to think about. Is having a modest fee something that deters abuse of the system?

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Kheel Planners Detail Free Transit Proposal

By Brad Aaron | Jan 25, 2008

Yesterday, Theodore "Ted" Kheel's traffic plan was officially unveiled with a 52-page report (pdf) outlining his proposal to make transit free via a round-the-clock \$16 congestion charge for cars (\$32 for trucks) entering Manhattan below 60th Street. The report says Kheel's "Bolder Plan" would cut CBD traffic by 25 percent, and traffic citywide by nearly [...]

Kheel Plan: Double the Congestion Charge & Make Transit Free

By Brad Aaron | Dec 18, 2007

"If you were to design the ultimate system, you would have mass transit be free and charge an enormous amount for cars." So said Mayor Michael Bloomberg last April, right about the time he unveiled his plan to charge motorists a fee to drive into Manhattan's central business district. Eight months later, as the mayor's [...]

Bloomberg Tests Free-Transit Waters

By Charles Komanoff | Aug 4, 2009

Mayor Bloomberg lifted a page straight from the Kheel Plan playbook yesterday in calling on the MTA to make crosstown buses free [PDF]. Bus riders and transit advocates should be beaming. Photo of M14 bus: Kriston Lewis/Flickr. Free buses will save bus riders time and money and will benefit everyone by luring some taxi and [...]

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By Brad Aaron | Apr 21, 2008

As former deputy mayor and Traffic Congestion Mitigation Commission Chair Marc Shaw predicts that congestion pricing may re-emerge soon in the form a proposal to toll 60th Street and the East River bridges, the Daily Politics reports that Ted Kheel is planning to put up \$1 million to promote his free transit plan heading into [...]

Q & A With Charles Komanoff on Kheel Plan 2

By Ben Fried | Dec 10, 2008

Charles Komanoff in the booth at WNYC earlier this year. Photo: WNYC/Flickr Today Ted Kheel released a revised version of his plan to fund transit through a congestion pricing mechanism on motor vehicle traffic. Streetsblog spoke to one of Kheel's lead analysts, Charles Komanoff, about the updated plan (see the major components here) and why [...]