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Downtown Express photo by Caroline Debevec

The new plans are meant to cut traffic in Lower Manhattan and other parts of the city.

Fare hikes? How about free buses instead, plan asks

By Josh Rogers

With state legislators starting to wrestle with a plan to close the M.T.A.'s budget deficits with payroll taxes, tolls, and modest fare hikes, an alternative idea to make the subways mostly free has been revived by two transportation advocates.

"We have a radically different plan that can capture the public's imagination and pass," said Charles Komanoff, a transportation analyst.

Komanoff is the chief consultant to the plan developed by Ted Kheel, 93, a prominent labor mediator who helped settle transit strikes decades ago and has focused on the environment in recent years.

Their idea is to charge drivers between \$5 and \$25 depending on the time of day to enter Manhattan below 60th St., in order to fund mass transit and reduce the subway fare down to between 50 cents and \$1.25 during the day. Subways would be free nights and weekends and buses would be free at all times. The plan also calls for a 46 percent increase in taxi fares, which Komanoff said will be key to winning broad support in the city because Manhattan residents take a lot more cabs.

"We hope this will soften the objections of Brooklyn and Queens and will also generate more revenue," he said.

Komanoff supported Mayor Mike Bloomberg's traffic pricing plan, which failed in Albany this year, but at the time he said the Kheel plan would be better because the opponents to the mayor's plan were passionate, while supporters were lukewarm without any sweeteners like free mass transit.

The Kheel idea, which was modified this week to include some subway fares, still has the power to get lawmakers to stop and take notice. Assemblymember Adriano Espallat, who supported Bloomberg's plan, was very resistant to Ravitch's toll idea at a State Assembly hearing Wednesday in Lower Manhattan, but when asked if he would favor higher tolls with free or low subway fares he wanted to hear more.

"That's something I'd like to review and consider," Espallat told Downtown Express.

He's not the only congestion pricing plan supporter who's resisting or opposing bridge tolls. State Senator-elect Daniel Squadron, who will represent Downtown Manhattan and Brooklyn, and Councilmember John Liu of Flushing both supported the mayor's plan and oppose the Ravitch recommendation on tolls.

Squadron released a critique of the Ravitch plan this week, pointing out what was "on track" and where the public should "mind the gap."

He said bridge tolls as proposed, "divide the city and do not deal with congestion except in a targeted area.... I'd rather have a conversation about improving congestion pricing."

He praised Ravitch for emphasizing the need to improve bus service, and elements of his other mass transit revenue ideas including the proposed payroll tax of 33 cents on every \$100 of salary, though Squadron wants to see protections for small businesses. Instead of tolls, Squadron would prefer sliding driving fees based on time of day and fuel efficiency, and other revenue ideas such as market rate parking prices for street parking.

Komanoff said one of the biggest problems with the Ravitch plan is it only reduces traffic by 3 percent and "continues the century-old disconnect between transit policy and auto policy." He estimates traffic will be reduced by 33 percent under Kheel.

Ravitch, whom the governor appointed to lead the effort to close the Metropolitan Transportation Authority budget gaps, proposes tolling Harlem River crossings at the subway fare rate and said he thought that would reduce traffic some.

"I think it will reduce traffic some, sure," he told Downtown Express. "But it will be reduced [more] because there will be bus service."

Ravitch, who ran the M.T.A. 25 years ago and is often praised for ending the subway system's decades of disrepair, proposes expanding bus service greatly before the new tolls go into effect. He was not aware of the latest revisions to the Kheel plan, but he didn't think much of the overall idea.

"He has believed the subway should be free for a long time," Ravitch said of Kheel. "I have spent too much of my life making sure the fare was kept where it was or at reasonable increments to have any conviction that at any point the government was going to subsidize the system enough that it'll be free."

Ravitch said he considered congestion pricing, but his commission went with tolls and payroll taxes because it would generate a lot more money, \$2.1 billion a year, and because of all of the opposition to the Bloomberg plan. The mayor's plan would have generated just under \$500 million. The Kheel plan, with more than a \$2 billion subsidy to transit riders, would be in between, generating \$1 billion for the M.T.A. budget.

Jeff Zupan, a transportation analyst for the Regional Plan Association, thinks the Kheel idea is "untenable" because Ravitch "has got enough problems convincing people to pay small tolls... Philosophically, I don't believe people should get something for nothing."

But Kathy Wylde, president of the Partnership for New York, which represents the city's largest corporations, said the Kheel plan has something that is missing from the other two — an easy to understand reason to support it strongly.

"The beauty of Ted's plan is people will get a free bus is better than paying," she said. "There is definitely something to it."

She served on the commission that made adjustments to the Bloomberg plan and was one of its biggest supporters before it was defeated. She likes all three plans and would not rank them. She described the Kheel proposal as a "more dramatic" way to reduce traffic and raise mass transit money.

Wylde said the Ravitch plan leaves room for varied pricing during rush hour which would reduce traffic more, and said the payroll tax is small enough not to be a concern.

Komanoff said although the tax will go to employers it will hurt workers more because it will cut into wages. "It's exactly the worst medicine for an economy that is already in the tank," he said.

He said free and low-fare subways will not overwhelm the system because the \$1.25 rate would only be from 8 a.m. to 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. to 6 p.m., the most overcrowded hours. Riders would only pay 50 cents or 75 cents by making a small shift in time, thus better utilizing the system, he added.

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2 Comments

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bill
December 15th, 2008 at 8:48 AM
If we really want to alter the use of mass transit, it should be free at all times. It should be funded by the general income tax on all NYC residents (as schools, parks, police etc are funded) as it benefits all NYC residents. Visitors should be charged for this thru a hotel tax. All roads into NYC should be tolled at the border of NYC (all 5 boroughs), not between boroughs.

Lennin Reyes
December 13th, 2008 at 6:33 PM
This is an excellent idea shown by Komanoff. This would allow less reliance on cabs for not only Manhattan riders, but us Bronx riders that take cabs to Washington Heights (since buses that run over there are very mediocre in service).

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