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Talking point

How about free subways to go with that traffic pricing?

By Charles Komanoff

The debate over congestion pricing in New York City has featured a raft of surprises in its first nine months. Downtown politicians who ought to be fervent supporters have damned Mayor Bloomberg's cordon fee proposal with faint praise, while liberal groups like the Drum Major Institute have broken with "no user fees" orthodoxy and are backing a congestion charge to cut traffic.

More surprises are doubtless in store. But let's not forget Machiavelli's timeless warning to would-be reformers:

There is nothing more difficult to take in hand than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things ... the innovator has for enemies all those who have done well under the old conditions, and lukewarm defenders in those who may do well under the new.

It's that last part, about lukewarm defenders, that hangs like a dark cloud over the Traffic Congestion Mitigation Commission. It took tremendous courage for the mayor to propose his congestion fee last April, but enacting it will require more than lukewarm advocacy. And it's not clear that the mayor's proposal offers enough tangible benefits to inspire red-hot support. The same may be true of the amended plan the commission was stitching as this article went to press.

But there is a plan that might fit the bill: it's attorney Ted Kheel's plan for free buses and subways in New York City, financed by an even steeper congestion charge than the mayor's.

A common reaction to Kheel's idea is skepticism, understandably enough. Why stir up further opposition, when Mayor Bloomberg is already waving a red flag in front of drivers by suggesting any congestion charge at all. And why deprive the hard-pressed transit system of farebox revenue it needs not just to operate day-to-day, but to blossom into a 21st century system?

The skeptics are starting to come around, though, now that they've seen the 52-page report I helped prepare, "A Bolder Plan: Balancing Free Transit and Congestion Pricing in New York City." This bolder plan — the "Kheel plan" — is a set of interconnected policies, mostly concerning the price to drive or use transit. The heart of the plan is to finance free buses and subways by charging a stiff but fair price, \$16, to drive into the congested core of the New York metropolis. The plan generates additional revenues via a 25 percent taxi surcharge, along with market-rate curbside parking charges on all streets from the Battery to 96th St.

To analyze these measures, we created an interactive computer model that ties together every facet of passenger transport in New York City, including transit, auto, taxi and bike; incorporates the effects of price changes and time savings on travel choices; and takes account of interactivity between traffic volumes and speeds.

Here's what our model reports when we plug in the Kheel plan measures:

- Universal free transit with less crowding than today.
- 25 percent less traffic within the Manhattan business district, and 9 percent less citywide.
- More travel, not less, as growth in transit trips more than offsets the drop in auto trips.
- Huge gains in recovered productivity from saving over 100 million "vehicle hours" a year that are now wasted in traffic.
- A revenue infusion of almost half a billion dollars a year for the city's transit system.
- Vast new public space in the heart of the city.
- Impressive environmental and health benefits stemming from decreased driving and increased walking and bicycling.

This bounty comes from the many synergies in the Kheel plan, like this one: under the Kheel plan, 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 else's ride. No more fumbling at the door for your MetroCard. This in turn makes the buses more attractive to people who might otherwise drive or travel by cab. That in turn makes for less traffic, which speeds bus travel and attracts still more riders. Where will the buses come from to handle the load? They're here now; the numbers tell us that buses will be able to make six runs in the time it now takes them to do five.

The political synergies are just as powerful. If the Machiavellian problem for congestion pricing is not that opposition is too high but that support is too low, consider that free transit offers a very clear-cut, dollars-and-cents, easily-understood benefit — it's money in your pocket. As I said last week to a legislator from central Brooklyn who has lined up against the mayor's congestion pricing plan, "Are you really going to tell your constituents that you walked away from a plan that would let them ride the trains and buses for free?" I wish you had seen his double-take when he said, "Um, okay, what's this Kheel plan again, and how exactly is it going to work?"

The answers are in our report, available at Ted's Web site, www.nyn.org/kheelplan. With the report finished, the work of marshaling a citywide coalition to support the Kheel plan begins.

Charles Komanoff, a resident of Tribeca, headed up the team that researched and wrote the Kheel report.

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