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# Silver says bridge tolls are a lesser evil

By Josh Rogers

Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver called bridge tolls tied to subway fares the lesser of "two evil" ways to close the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's \$2 billion operating budget.

"In Column A you have [mass transit] service cuts and fare increases," Silver told reporters at a Lower Manhattan event Friday. "Column B is revenue — revenue, clearly is the better option... This is the lesser of two burdens, two evils you might say."

He said his compromise idea has the support of Richard Ravitch, the former M.T.A. leader who prepared a report for Gov. Paterson proposing \$5 tolls on the East River bridges and subway-fare tolls over the Harlem River.

When asked if the M.T.A. would take in hundreds of millions dollars less under his proposal than it would under Ravitch, Silver said it would not be "significantly less."

He said the Assembly is not considering higher tolls during rush hour to reduce traffic.

"No, it is not on the table," Silver told Downtown Express. "This is not about congestion."

Mayor Bloomberg's plan to charge drivers an \$8 congestion fee to enter Midtown and Lower Manhattan failed a year ago in Albany. Silver ended up supporting the mayor's plan at the end, but he made it clear he had concerns about the proposal and that he would not lobby his members to vote for it.

With Silver's full support for the low-toll option, its chances of passing the Assembly appear strong. The chances in the State Senate are not as certain. Both houses are trying to pass something within the next few weeks, before the state budget negotiations take over Albany.

State Sen. Daniel Squadron, in contrast to the "two evils" description, said bridge tolls are the "least good" way to generate revenue. But he would support them if the alternative was to do nothing.

"The Legislature has to step up and do something," he said in a phone interview. Squadron, whose district includes Downtown Manhattan and Brooklyn, said the severe cuts the M.T.A. would make without more revenue would threaten the city economy. The cuts under the so-called "doomsday budget" include cutting the Z train entirely and ending late night service of the N in Lower Manhattan.

But Squadron said congestion pricing, market rate street parking prices, and raising vehicle registration fees for gas guzzlers are all better ways to generate revenue than tolls.

He thinks the Silver plan is better than Ravitch's because the chances of passing it are better. He did say higher tolls during rush hour would be an improvement, but Silver has ruled out that option. Squadron said the Senate is circulating a proposed bill based on Silver's proposal and he will try to make changes to it.

Silver said lower tolls will have some effect on traffic because they will prevent subway cuts which would encourage more people to drive to work.

Silver's plan has received broad, but not unanimous support, from transit, environmental and business groups who also favored congestion pricing. The Straphangers Campaign, the New York League of Conservation Voters, and the Partnership for New York City all released statements in support.

"Speaker Silver's proposal reflects the widely-held view that the different sectors of New York's economy directly benefiting from transit — riders, motorists and businesses — should all contribute to the system's continued well-being," the Straphangers said.

Both the Ravitch and Silver plan include a payroll or "mobility tax" on employers in the city and downstate suburbs. Under Ravitch, the tax was 33 cents on every \$100 in salary. Dan Weiller, a Silver spokesperson, said the details of the bill are being worked out and the payroll tax has not been determined.

Charles Komanoff, a transportation analyst and harsh critic of the Ravitch plan, was equally critical of the Silver proposal.

"The 'equation' of a bridge toll to a subway fare ought to be disturbing to any fair-minded New Yorker," Komanoff wrote in an email to Downtown Express. "For one thing, there's no 'fare-pooling' equivalent to car-pooling, so a subway-riding family of four will pay \$8 while a car-riding family pays \$2. For another, the congestion cost of each additional car trip into Manhattan is on the order of \$30 (total 'time costs' to other drivers), whereas the same for a subway ride is measured in pennies. Silver's equation flunks any moral algebra."

The Partnership for New York City produced a report a few years ago estimating that businesses lose billions of dollars in lost time waiting in traffic.

Komanoff and Ted Kheel, an environmentalist, former labor mediator and perhaps an elder statesmen of city politics — have proposed sliding but very high traffic pricing fees based on the time to pay for free or low-fare buses and subways.

"The way out is to tackle traffic and transit together, which 'congestion pricing done right' can do," Komanoff said. "Ted would say that our leaders' lack of vision is costing our city dearly."

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