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Beyond Ravitch: Still Time for a Bolder Plan

By Charles Komanoff on March 10, 2009

As Albany lawmakers ponder which of a half-dozen Ravitch plan variations they might support, the possibility looms that no solution may come in time. New Yorkers could see their fares rise 25 percent while service is cut back -- a twin catastrophe in this tough economic time. Yet no big new ideas are being advanced to protect mass transit users, which is why I believe the time has come for consideration of Ted Kheel's and my traffic plan.

Our plan rests on three powerful attributes: revenue generation, tolling equality, and sheer efficiency. We achieve these with an inclusive pricing model that asks drivers to pay a fee ranging from \$2 to \$10 upon entering the Central Business District with the price dependent on the time of day, and charges taxi passengers for their contribution to congestion as well.

- The basics:
- Our toll plan generates \$1.7 billion a year in revenue; that's twice as much as the \$800 million from Ravitch's tolls, even though our top toll of \$10 matches Ravitch's \$5 (we charge inbound only).
- Our plan has no free riders, oops, make that free drivers. Jersey drivers pay the toll, drivers entering the CBD at 60th Street pay the toll, and Manhattanites pay the lion's share of a 33 percent taxi fare surcharge that raises a quarter of our total revenue.
- Everyone wins something in our plan. Buses are free (paid for by \$800 million of our \$1.7 billion revenue pot). Straphangers get deep off-peak discounts (paid for by the rest -- though some of the reductions might need to be deferred to help stanch the MTA deficit) and a bit more elbow-room in rush hour due to peak-spreading. Drivers get a 20 percent traffic speed-up in the CBD (faster travel "upstream" too), while the variable toll offers a measure of choice.
- Free and faster-moving buses will achieve three goals. They'll lure enough drivers and straphangers out of gridlocked streets and packed trains to ease crowding on both. By stopping drip-torture boarding that halts movement during Metrocard-swiping, they'll traverse their routes fast enough to handle the influx. And they'll provide a huge break to riders across the city, a disproportionate percentage of whom live in poorer, non-Manhattan neighborhoods.

Politically, who knows? It's easy to shrug and say that if Albany can't get it together to enact \$2 tolls, there's no chance for an ambitious plan like Kheel-Komanoff.

And yet... unlike the plans on the table, which impose tolls while giving little back (as did Mayor Bloomberg's failed congestion pricing proposal), our plan is about gain, and freedom, and relief.

- Gain for the millions of transit riders who will enjoy better service and more spending money.
- Freedom from recurring fare hikes and service cuts.
- Significant relief from traffic congestion that frustrates drivers, dehumanizes our city and saps the economy.

Lately I've kept a low profile about our plan out of deference to Dick Ravitch and his well thought out plan that recognizes the gravity of the crisis. But Albany is so stuck, and the dialogue so stilled, that it seems time to air a bolder, more ambitious plan.

Since New Year's, I've discussed the Kheel-Komanoff plan with dozens of electeds and advocates. The private response has been uniformly positive.

There may still be time to win a real hearing -- or at least infuse elements of our plan into Ravitch's. Let's find each other now, before it's too late.

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Rhywun: If NYC had more control over its affairs, perhaps. But with so much local policy under state control, forget it.

gecko: Charles Komanoff, I'm all for the plan. Since Columbia University's Earth Institute serves as an advisor to the city, why don't you get economist Joseph Stiglitz to do an independent analysis to confirm what you are advocating?

Eric McClure: The Kheel-Komanoff Plan is clearly the smartest, most effective solution on the table. Can we get a wholesale change in Albany so we can get it implemented?

Chris O'Leary: Look, we can dream about something like this, or we can put our efforts and energy behind something that actually has a chance of making it through Albany before March 25th. We can focus on a plan like this next time the MTA is crying charity -- next year.

Mark Walker: It never hurts to advocate for a plan that would fully fund the transit system. If activists and even a tiny handful of sympathetic electeds put this on the table, thus changing the terms of the debate, we might walk away with something better than the Ravitch plan, instead of an inadequate fraction of a plan that was inadequate to begin with.

fdr: The politicians will picture their opponents in the next election saying "The incumbent supported ten dollar tolls" and that will be the end of it.

J. Mork: How does "The incumbent made buses free and made off-peak subway rides cheaper and averted a transit crisis" not totally trump your scenario, fdr?

Peter Flint: So how does the average Streetsblog reader with no particular connections help get this on the table? Tell us what to do!

Mark Walker: Peter, send a link to this Streetsblog story to your state senator and state assemblyman and tell them this is what you want. Having said this, I will now do it.

Mark Walker: OK, here's what I sent to my state legislators: [Their first names], I strongly want the transit system to be fully funded. While the Ravitch plan has some good elements, I think fully funding the transit system will require some stronger medicine in the long run. I urge you to look at this...

Thanks, Mark Fleischmann [My address]

Larry Littlefield: The plan admits a \$1.2 billion hole, not including capital needs. And if the NYC buses were free, the MTA would have to make the suburban buses free as well -- while increasing service since farebox recapture would no longer be a factor in determining service levels.

Why not just increase subway fares to a level sufficient to fully cover operating costs? With all the discounts, the subway fare would still be a bargain.

And then all the buses could be made free, with the level of service cut to the level of subsidy available. No one would have a right to complain. And more rapid boarding might offset a smaller number of buses and drivers, since one could make more runs.

J. Mork: I assume the transit system is working for a \$10 toll won't work any better than saving the transit system for a \$2 toll is working now. Obviously most of the outer borough pols are afraid they will be blamed for the tolls more than they will be applauded for saving the fare.

Larry Littlefield: "Obviously most of the outer borough pols are afraid they will be blamed for the tolls more than they will be applauded for saving the fare." All the more reason to prefer a short term doomsday people can hate them for to a long-run deterioration they can blame on someone else.

Fritz: Someone a while ago wrote--I think Cap'n Transit--about a problem with free buses and demand which I kind of bought into. Maybe free buses will be good someday but I would prefer the MTA store up some of the money from a plan like this to pay off debt and invest in new, important capital projects which will make service better in the future. I have no problem subsidizing fares of low income workers but I think for the marginal cost most high/middle income people pay for the subway/bus as it is, that most everyone would do better making service better, upgrading stations to show when the train is coming, etc..

Greg: Holy shit those will be expensive cab rides. That is a pretty strong disincentive on what is essential quasi-public transportation.

Charles Komanoff: Several commentators compared Kheel-Komanoff \$10 tolls to Silver's \$2 toll or Ravitch's \$5. Those comparisons are apples-oranges twice over. First, Ravitch and Silver charge both ways, while K-K charges inbound only. Second, \$10 is the peak toll in K-K; the average is a shade over \$6. So the correct comparison is Ravitch's \$10 and Silver's \$4 to Kheel-Komanoff's \$6.

(How, then, do we raise 2-4 times Ravitch's or Silver's revenue? Simple: we toll every portal, not just some; we eliminate "offsets" of existing tolls; we surcharge taxis; and of course we don't exempt NYC residents.)

Speaking of the taxi surcharge: I'm glad someone noticed that it's a key part of the Kheel-Komanoff plan. Taxis, like private autos and trucks, should be charged for their causation of congestion. The surcharge also helps balance the toll plan geographically and income-wise.

I encourage folks to look on the revenue from the plan: \$1.7 billion a year. If you have different ideas than our fare reductions for using the revenues, by them out. Download the [Railance Transportation Analyzer spreadsheet](#), input your fares (and congestion tolls) and see how your revenue and traffic results compare with ours.

fdr: Apples and oranges it may be, Charles, but in a political campaign it will be the headline. Assemblyman X will try to explain, "Yes, but it's really only about \$6 while Ravitch was really \$10, and this would raise a lot more money for the MTA." Most voters will just read the headline. All I'm saying is that this is the way most politicians think about these issues: how it's going to play in the next election.

J. Mork: Right--but since most NYC households don't have a car, doesn't that make non-drivers a powerful voting bloc?

Urbanis: Yes, non-drivers would be a powerful voting bloc... If we could actually vote for city- or state-level politicians who had our interests at heart. But short of running for office ourselves, we are forced to choose between politicians who are uniformly car-centric, even when their agendas may differ in other areas. In my district, for example, Adriano Espallat has been continually holding rallies against tolling the bridges--and he was the "progressive" politician.

fdr: The definition of a voting bloc is people who vote the same way because they feel strongly about a particular issue. Outer borough politicians figure that drivers who are angry about paying tolls will vote as a bloc against the incumbents who voted for tolls, while non-drivers will not be as aroused by the issue and won't be motivated to vote as a bloc for the incumbents. Especially if they don't see any great improvement in mass transit that the incumbents can take credit for.

Charles Komanoff: fdr's point (#20) is well taken, and is precisely why the Kheel-Komanoff plan insists on free buses: this step can be taken the same day (or the day prior, preferably) that the tolls start up and thus provide an immediate, concrete, unassailable benefit from the toll revenue. "Losers cry louder than winners sing" is fdr's point, and it's all too true, but there will be so many free-bus beneficiaries that if each one sings only a fifth as loud as each toll-paying driver cries, the winners can carry the day.

Dylan MacDonald: Hey Charlie, it's Dylan MacDonald. Glad to see you're still fighting the good fight. Not surprising your and Ted Kheel's plan makes the most sense. It's incredible to me how cars still hold sway in NYC which probably has the lowest per capita car ownership in the US. So sad.

Russell Bartels: The plan is said to have a benefit of: sheer efficiency In addition to: revenue generation, tolling equality. Buses in the outer parts of the boroughs are inefficient in terms of revenue and pollution per passenger as well as being grossly inconvenient. The MTA/CITY undoubtedly makes money on the high density routes and loses money on the low density routes. (But there is no published data that I can find.) The household density in these outer borough areas is between Manhattan and the suburbs, but without either ubiquitous transit stops or park and ride facilities. From these locations, driving the short distance to Manhattan, and other areas in the City, is a rational choice, overwhelmingly so if you have a free parking placard or corporate reimbursement for parking. The only win-win solution for these areas is a radically new park and ride concept.

Cap'n Transit: No, Russell, park-and-rides are not the answer. They generate sprawl. At best, they're acceptable as a temporary stopgap -- but only if they're explicitly temporary, with specific sunset measures in place to remove them after a transition period. As you say, there's another solution: increase transit service in those areas.

Russell Bartels: The household density of the NYC far outer boroughs will not change much in the lifetime of our readers. So, driving to the CBD, but mainly to other metro destinations, will continue to be a rational choice. A recent NYU study shows over fifty percent of the trips are by car in several NYC outer borough districts. Since subway and rail stations are sparse, the use of more buses for these less dense areas is proposed, although this will be expensive if the routes and frequencies are increased significantly. Now, the fare covers, on average, about one-fourth of the bus operating cost city-wide. Thus, in the outer boroughs, the fare is covering very little of the operating cost. Consequently, we might want to consider options that involve changing the status quo. But consideration of options will take a little imagination. I invite a discussion of how we might change the vehicle technology, ownership/rental, time/place/distance monitoring, and many more ideas.

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