



Friday, March 27, 2009

14 Comments

Whither the MTA: Beyond the Failed Stopgap

by Charles Komanoff on March 27, 2009

This week's MTA vote won't just cost New Yorkers 25 percent more per ride, it will also be costly in lost time.

Using the [Balanced Transportation Analyzer](#) (BTA), I estimate that the fare hikes and service cuts which begin June 1 will:

- ▶ Add an average of 6 percent more waiting and travel time to bus and subway commutes; which will...
 - ▶ cause 40,000 more autos to pile into the Manhattan Central Business District each day, which will...
 - ▶ slow traffic by an average of 5 percent in the CBD and 1-2 percent across the City, costing...
 - ▶ drivers, truckers and bus riders \$600 million in lost time annually within the CBD, and probably \$1.5 billion or more citywide.

The one-two punch of higher fares and less frequent service can be expected to shrink subway use by around 8 percent and bus ridership by 6 percent. This is a calamity not only to our city's vitality but for the MTA as well, since it cuts deeply into the very revenue these measures were supposed to generate. Indeed, the BTA model projects that the real gain in farebox revenues won't even reach \$500 million -- well under half of the projected \$1.2 billion deficit.

The key criteria by which New York City transportation policies are judged are driver expenses, rider expenses, driver travel times and rider travel times. The MTA and the legislature have managed to worsen three out of four -- and, for good measure, have aggravated others, such as traffic pollution and mayhem. A stopped clock could hardly have done worse.

Advocates spent four months in [feverish but fruitless campaigning](#) for a stopgap solution -- the [Ravitch Plan](#) -- that was buoyed more by Dick Ravitch's sterling reputation than by its intrinsic merits. Indeed, the plan was rife with inequities:

- ▶ Payrolls in exurban Dutchess County would be taxed at the same rate as those of transit-reliant New Yorkers.
- ▶ [Most Bronx and Brooklyn drivers would pay new tolls](#) and yet those driving in from New Jersey would not.
- ▶ Manhattan residents would garner much of the benefit from lighter traffic in the form of quieter streets and faster cab rides, yet they would pay little of the tolls.

In short, "shared sacrifice" was more rhetoric than reality. Plus, the Ravitch Plan offered no incentive to switch trips out of rush hours to less crowded travel times, in effect foreclosing on both choice and efficiency.

On the four criteria above, Ravitch offered not a single solid win. The plan was a Band-Aid, but the times demanded a major overhaul.

True, [Albany is broken](#). Even a perfectly balanced plan would have faced tough sledding. Political reform is essential, but so too is recognizing that transit and traffic won't get the needed makeover until they are addressed in a [unified and broadened transportation vision](#).

14 Comments | Last comment by [glenn](#) | [Leave a comment](#)

Glenn

Charles -- Nice analysis on the first half of what we are missing by not having the Ravitch plan, but I thoroughly disagree that Manhattan residents would benefit disproportionately from that bridge toll plan.

The approaches to the free bridges along the Harlem and East River would have garnered the most benefit.

And if you want to get into an interborough dispute over who's subsidizing who, let's run an analysis of what a fair fare would really be for someone traveling 12 miles from Queens using a bus and a train, versus someone in Manhattan taking a crosstown bus 1 mile or two express stops on the train. Charging the real cost based on distance or number of modes (as is done in many other cities) would catch some folks attention in the outerboroughs.

The current "One System, One Fare" is great (I hope we can afford to keep it), but let's be fair if we start casting stones on who is getting benefits from the current system.

March 27, 2009 at 11:18 am | [Link](#) | # 1

Mark Walker

The Doomsday discussion has too often emphasized fare hikes over service cuts. Komanoff shows where the most serious damage will occur -- to the city's economy. The mainstream media needs to pick up on this. Judging from last night's coverage on WPIX-11, I think they're getting interested in this angle.

March 27, 2009 at 11:27 am | [Link](#) | # 2

t

Also, think of the hits the economy will take in terms of productivity. If it takes me 6% more time to get to work every day, that time has to come from somewhere. Since I'm not cutting back on my work hours, a longer commute will mean less time for me to spend money or do things when I'm not at work.

March 27, 2009 at 11:46 am | [Link](#) | # 3

Charles Komanoff

Glenn -- Thanks for the reminder that the approaches to the free bridges would have benefited from the reduced traffic under the Ravitch Plan. But it stands to reason that Manhattan would have enjoyed the biggest net benefit since (i) traffic there would have experienced the steepest percentage drop, and (ii) residents of Manhattan would have spent the least, percentage-wise for tolls.

Mark -- You'll be interested to know that the BTA model indicates that the fare hikes and service cuts each contribute roughly 50-50 to the overall negative results.

March 27, 2009 at 11:49 am | [Link](#) | # 4

Bike Dude

sure the Ravitch plan wasn't perfect but it sure beats the doomsday scenario.

March 27, 2009 at 12:11 pm | [Link](#) | # 5

zz

Charlie's post is 99% right. I would change one word: "feverish" to "invisible." Straphangers et al. made a negligible effort to reach out in my district (also Monserrate's district). We need a transit advocacy community willing to organize at a grassroots level, or we'll continue to suffer defeats like this one.

March 27, 2009 at 12:29 pm | [Link](#) | # 6

Jeremy

I never understood the supposed "inequity" that East River tolls would give an unfair advantage to NJ. In truth, it would create equity -- NJ residents already pay tolls to the Port Authority on all Hudson crossings.

March 27, 2009 at 12:45 pm | [Link](#) | # 7

Glenn

Charles -- You're ignoring the larger point about equity in transit funding (Manhattan subsidizes the outerboroughs) while giving fodder to the anti-toll folks by saying that Manhattanites would have the biggest drop in traffic and not pay the tolls.

The folly of your analysis goes right back to the "One City, One Fare" policy. You (and the Fare Hike Four) took that as a pure gift and put it right into your pocket (SI got a free ferry too) and promptly set the new baseline for all future calculations of who's benefiting more than others. Where was the shared sacrifice then? Oh, gifts from heaven are fine, but when the check comes later, we have to split it...not very neighborly.

Sorry Charles, that pig just won't fly with me. The drivers in Manhattan are not from Manhattan, but they live with all the disgusting problems they create. And the drivers coming over the bridges for free are much higher income than mass transit riders -- Manhattan riders might be now paying more in the fare than the cost of their trips -- how's that for equity?

I think Bloomberg should now go full throttle on taking as much street space away from motorists.

March 27, 2009 at 1:29 pm | [Link](#) | # 8

Larry Littlefield

"I never understood the supposed "inequity" that East River tolls would give an unfair advantage to NJ. In truth, it would create equity -- NJ residents already pay tolls to the Port Authority on all Hudson crossings."

I agree.

Except that the Port Authority has kept tolls below TBTA levels during recessions by sucking funds out of NYC airports, which is why the airport access program was cut back to the Airdrain from JFK to Jamaica. So NJ residents are paying, but not their full share.

March 27, 2009 at 1:29 pm | [Link](#) | # 9

Rhywun

> Manhattan residents would garner much of the benefit from lighter traffic

As they should, because they contribute far less of it. And boy do they pay for that privilege--ask their landlords.

March 27, 2009 at 2:01 pm | [Link](#) | # 10

Charles Komanoff

Glenn & Rhywun --

You're making similar (important) points so I'll address you together.

Of course Manhattan residents float the City and State budgets far more, per capita, than others. I made that very point -- rather elegantly, I'd say -- in a 2003 report trumpeting the equity of East River bridge tolls ([click here](#)). It had no political impact whatsoever.

Why? Because politics, as Machiavelli pointed out half-a-millennium ago, revolves around challenging (or defending) the *status quo*. It is the world as it is that people are accustomed to, and which we must address.

Glenn, as for my "giving fodder to the anti-toll folks by saying that Manhattanites would have the biggest drop in traffic and not pay the tolls". I take it you don't dispute my facts, you just question my judgment? I've simply stated what everyone already knew, or suspected.

I don't mind this back-and-forth, but I think we would do better to consider the challenge Aaron (Naparstek) laid down in his post today. Glenn, I think your question there (Why is everyone knocking the Ravitch Plan today?) has an obvious answer. It excited no one.

March 27, 2009 at 3:45 pm | [Link](#) | # 11

Glenn McAnanama

I still think the biggest beneficiaries of the Ravitch plan are at the approaches to the free bridges and outerborough mass transit riders. Manhattan residents by and large will pay the extra amount easily and be less impacted by service cuts than folks in the outerboroughs.

Tolls on now free bridges, regional payroll tax to pay for the lifeblood of our regional economy are pretty exciting to me. Count me as an oddball in the advocacy community.

What's your thrilling and exciting alternative and how many votes does that have? The Kheel Plan? How many co-sponsors does that have? Would Paterson even sign it?

So yes, I question your judgment too.

Knocking the Ravitch plan now, which is only a few State Senators from becoming reality without having a politically viable alternative seems to me as reckless as the Fare Hike Four's "alternative".

But sure, go ahead and excite me with your alternative. I don't see it here.

March 27, 2009 at 6:44 pm | [Link](#) | # 12

Komanoff

Glenn -- In just the past two months I've published articles about the Kheel-Komanoff Plan in Streetsblog, Gotham Gazette, Newsday and Orist. Links to those articles are in the BTA spreadsheet (in the second worksheet, "Our Plans," starting at Row 70) which you can access via the link in the second sentence of my post that started this thread.

In one sense, then, I'm surprised you hadn't heard about the Kheel-Komanoff plan. OTOH, K-K got frozen out of the discussion from early December on. Partly that's because it took months of immense, intense work to put the K-K plan together (if you download the spreadsheet you'll get a sense of the enormity of the analysis underlying the plan), and we weren't able to get the plan out in time to head off and possibly influence Ravitch.

But the bigger reason is that the advocacy community cleaved to Ravitch from the get-go and, despite showering K-K with private praise, excluded it from their politicking.

I've fulfilled my obligations to the community and ought to be allowed to speak out about a plan (K-K) that appears to be vastly superior to Ravitch -- not just theoretically but politically as well (that was the point of my Newsday piece).

Please feel free to critique the K-K plan. But please refrain from questioning my right to talk about it. I've paid my dues.

March 27, 2009 at 9:40 pm | [Link](#) | # 13

glenn

Believe me Charles, I well aware of the K-K plan. I think it's an interesting idea, but I think folks should have to pay something (more than a nominal amount) to ride transit. So we'll start with me not being terribly excited at your plan.

What concerns me is that in this post at a critical time when advocates are still trying to get people to call Albany (the Post is sending buses), you went pretty negative on the Ravitch plan in similar ways as the Fare Hike Four.

So here I am saying that stinks, I disagree and I think your plan has a snowball's chance politically.

You can say whatever you want, but I think that second half of the post just muddled the waters to not real end.

March 28, 2009 at 7:37 am | [Link](#) | # 14

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— Steven F

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