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Free Mass Transit

The MTA and Our Environment:



Make Rides Free, For All Our Sakes

By **MEDHANIE ESTIPHANOS**

From 1904 to 1948, the New York City subway fare was 5 cents. Ridership peaked in 1948 when, accounting for inflation, the fare was at its cheapest level. In the mid-90s the average per-ride fare was dramatically reduced when the unlimited Metrocard system was introduced; consequently ridership rose steeply. Regardless of what measure you use, there is a single and consistent fact about the use of our subways: price matters. The lower the fare, the more riders we have. And we want more riders.

Increasing the use of public transit makes our economy grow faster. Traffic is getting worse in Manhattan's Central Business District (south of 60th street) and is estimated to be costing us \$13 billion a year. This figure excludes the health care costs that congestion pollutants also impose. In parts of the Bronx where the city's major freeways pass residential areas, the asthma rate is five times higher than the national average. To put this into perspective, the MTA's entire budget, including capital costs, is only \$11 billion.

Traffic is also destroying our environment. Besides the massive pollutants that are released into the air as a result of car traffic, massive pollutants are being put into our rivers, streams, and oceans. Cars spill immense amounts of oil on our roads each year. Little drops of oil and gas add up to a far greater amount than the infamous Exxon Valdez oil spill. Also, as car tires wear out they leave tons of plastic tread on our roads. What's worse is that every time it rains, these deadly pollutants get washed into our rivers, streams, and oceans. These are small examples of the very big cost of an expensive public transit system.

But we can stop this by simply promoting and incentivizing the use of public transit.

And there is no better incentive than to make it FREE.

By making the MTA free we will also be providing massive relief for poor and working families who are finding themselves unable to afford transportation. We will provide relief to struggling artists who make our city so wonderful. Free mass transit will also make New York City a better tourist destination. Free mass transit will greatly benefit us all and make our City even more magical. How do we pay for it? By implementing congestion pricing.

Congestion pricing is inevitable. It is an effective tool for busting the ever-increasing gridlock that we are witnessing across our city streets. Simply put, congestion pricing is a cure for our worsening traffic problem. Other cities around the world, including London, Stockholm, Singapore, and Milan, have already implemented congestion pricing. As a result, gridlock has dramatically decreased and productivity has increased. Moreover, the revenue generated from congestion pricing should go to funding a hurting MTA.

By implementing congestion pricing and using that pot of money to fund our public transit system, our City will once again be the vanguard for being green, efficient, and fair. Free mass transit will revitalize our city and put in place benefits that will be appreciated for generations to come.

[Update: Mr. Estiphanos notes on his **Web site** that this policy proposal is known as the "Kheel Plan." It was put forth in 1965 by Theodore Kheel, a transit lawyer. The Kheel proposal can be downloaded **here**.]

It's the Economy and Environment Stupid

The New York City public transportation system is the lifeblood of our great city. It serves as an economic engine and keeps us connected to all the wonderful things the City has to offer. However, recently this lifeblood has come under attack. Poor funding, poor planning, and the lack of bold actions on the part of political leaders have left the system in a crisis. Fare hikes and reduced services not only affects the economic prosperity of our great city but put new pressures on those struggling to find a job, take their kids to school, or simply enjoy what the City has to offer.

Many families have a hard time buying food and paying their bills at the end of the month let alone being able to afford \$5 per day for transportation. Our subway system is an important engine of our great City and working families depend on it more so than anyone.

If we are also to acknowledge and address our environmental crisis, then improving and providing unfettered access to public transportation must be a priority. We have to change our short term thinking. We can no longer allow politicians to put band-aid solutions on crises of this magnitude for the sake of getting past another elections cycle. We have to fundamentally change the way we think. We must plan and prepare for the long term. This is why I am strong supporter of the Kheel Plan.

The Kheel Plan dramatically changes how the MTA works and how we define "public transportation." It eliminates the current \$2 per ride fare, ensures no fare hikes, no cuts in services and it makes our transit system truly public by getting our taxes and fees to pay for it. Essentially, we would move to a FREE MTA service – again paid for by our taxes and fees.

By making the public transit system truly public, we would get many benefits in return.

First, everyone – regardless of income – would have access to one of the best public transportation systems in the world.

Second, it relieves low and middle income families of a big and reoccurring transportation expense. Parents can afford to get to work, get their children to school, and enjoy our great city without that sinking feeling of "we can't afford it."

Third, it allows those who want to find a job but can't afford the transportation an opportunity to go and apply for jobs where the jobs are available. So, whether you live in Bed-Stuy or Mid-Town, you will be able to go to where the jobs are. This would improve the living standard of every New Yorker.

Fourth, New York City becomes more attractive to tourists. People from around the globe who would love to visit the center of world but are put off by the expense would find a trip to our City more affordable. This means more visitors and increased tourism income to our great city.

Fifth, tourists would be incentivized to visit more remote parts of Brooklyn. Brooklyn is a common word around the world. It has been a central theme in popular music, art, movies and television that the world has consumed. By providing free access to all parts of Brooklyn, we would encourage tourists to visit Bed-Stuy, Clinton Hill, Fort Green, Crown Heights, Prospect Heights, and other parts of Brooklyn. This is good for the diversity of our community and good for our small businesses that are struggling to survive.

Sixth, it is good for our environment, the air that we breathe, and the water that we drink. By making the public transit free, people will be less likely to drive and more likely to ride our subways and buses. This would make our environment greener and reduce congestion across the City by removing hundreds of thousands of cars off the road.

The Kheel Plan is a well thought out analysis that provides a clear framework for how we can reform our MTA, ensure it works for everyone, and make our environment greener. The plan provides a comprehensive approach to funding the operation and expansion of the MTA. With minor changes and compromises, I believe it can transform our city, our mindset, and once again hold up New York City as the model for the rest of the world to follow.

To download the complete plan, please go to the Nurture New York's Nature website at: http://www.nnyn.org/kheelplan/Full%20Kheel%20Report%20for%20web%20_%2023%20Jan%202008.pdf

You may also visit NNYN's Balanced Transportation Analyzer to see how the funds would be generated and used: <http://www.nnyn.org/bta>