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Op-Ed



by Medhanie Estiphanos

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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, and 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 healthcare 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 cost 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 transit system 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.

Medhanie Estiphanos is a candidate for the New York City Council - District 35. Read this week's On the Record for more on Estiphanos.

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