

Tuesday, August 18, 2009

17 Comments

Time-Polluting Daily News Honcho Goes Public

by Charles Komanoff on August 18, 2009

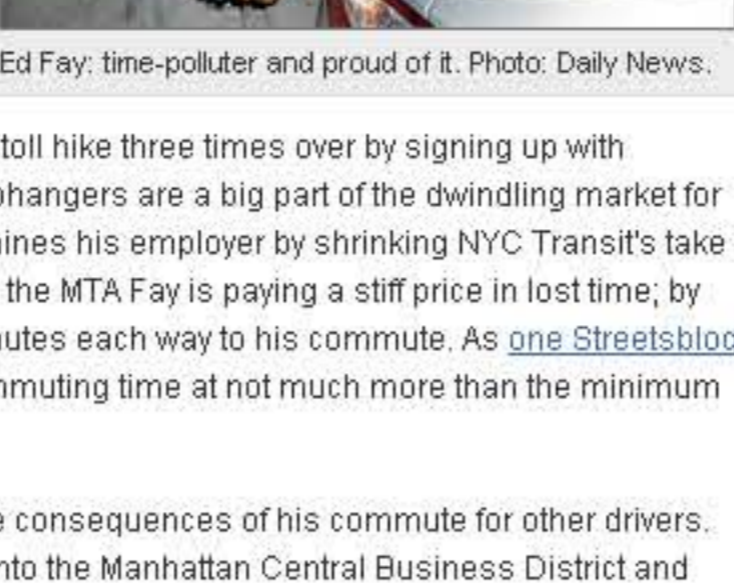


Car commuters waste more than emissions. Photo: Kevin Coles/Flickr.

In Utah, they flip off forest rangers and wheel their ATV's onto delicate wilderness trails. In the Virginia exurbs they lounge in air-conditioned trophy homes and write checks to stop carbon taxes. Here in NYC, they find their "Network" moment in a 25-cent bump in MTA bridge tolls, then ferret out toll-free routes into Manhattan and crow about them in the Daily News.

Meet Ed Fay, the smug-faced Daily News exec who took such umbrage last month when the MTA nudged the Henry Hudson Bridge toll to \$3.00 from \$2.75 that he now opts to drive through the untolled streets of Kingsbridge and Inwood. Fay boasted yesterday:

I decided that I'm not going to give the transients another cent to get to and from work. The MTA has stuck it to all of us countless times over the years and now it was time for me to pay them back. I will personally screw them out of \$1,000 over the next year.



Ed Fay: time-polluter and proud of it. Photo: Daily News.

The Ironies are many. For one thing, Fay could offset that toll hike three times over by signing up with E-ZPass, but he swears by cash. For another, since straphangers are a big part of the dwindling market for the daily paper, you could say that Fay's rebellion undermines his employer by shrinking NYC Transit's take from the toll revenues. There's also the fact that in stifling the MTA Fay is paying a stiff price in lost time, by his own estimate, detouring around the tolls adds 15 minutes each way to his commute. As one Streetsblog commenter pointed out, Fay implicitly values his own commuting time at not much more than the minimum wage.

But Fay's biggest grotesquerie is his obliviousness to the consequences of his commute for other drivers. By my estimation, an average 11-mile rush-hour car trip into the Manhattan Central Business District and back out again creates three to four hours of aggregate delays to all the other people trying to get around in cars, trucks and buses on the same roads at the same time. (With the recessionary drop in traffic, that figure is currently somewhat lower, but it's also higher in Fay's case if most of his return trips take place in the p.m. peak.)

By choosing to car-commute daily into the CBD, Mr. Screw-the-MTA is mostly screwing his fellow drivers.

And this is true whether Fay drives on local streets or pories up the \$3 bridge toll (\$2.09 with E-ZPass). To be sure, those three to four hours of delay are spread among thousands of drivers, no one of which loses more than 10 or 20 seconds queued behind Fay's automobile at each stoplight or highway ramp. And his contribution to traffic delays is no greater than that of anyone else who drives in the same places at the same time.

What's different is Fay's glee. He's spewing pollution, not so much from his tailpipe (autos rank relatively low in emissions these days), but "time pollution," by stealing precious minutes and seconds from his fellow New Yorkers. And he's proud of it.

Each night I add \$6 to the pile. And when the pile gets to \$1,000 -- about eight months from now -- I'll take my family out for a spectacular dinner and raise a glass toasting the bloated burns at the MTA and the toll increase that sent me over the edge.

Fay's bluster notwithstanding, I'll wager that after the big blowout he'll tire of rat-running and revert to the toll bridge. After all, even if he makes "just" \$100,000 a year at the News and values his commute time at only half his imputed hourly pay, he's still trading \$12.50 worth of time each day to save a measly \$6.00. But that return to sanity won't solve the systemic dysfunction by which anyone choosing to make a single car-trip to and from the CBD can impose \$100 in societal delay costs but pay just \$5 or \$10 in tolls themselves.

What Fay confronts us with is nothing less than the moral imperative of congestion pricing. Decisions that impose large delay costs on others demand commensurate charges. These need not begin at full-price. Congestion fees on the order of one-tenth of the full cost, as Ted Kheel and I propose (with revenues allocated to benefit transit), would be an excellent start. Let Ed Fay, time-polluter, pay.

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Geoffrey Hall: It's simply insanity, transport policy wise, to have different toll rates for what amounts to access to the same place (Manhattan) when an alternative (though inconvenient) is available.

He not only demonstrated the necessity of congestion pricing in New York (and pretty much anywhere else with a concentrated CBD), but that the worst case scenarios Streetsblog and other warned of will actually occur through people as selfish and idiotic as Fay.

August 18, 2009 at 12:21 pm | Link | #1

ddartley: There's yet another form of motorist pollution that I never see discussed--maybe because I'm misguided worrying about it and there's no science to say it's a problem--but I worry about it anyway: the open-or-like-blast of heat that comes out the front end of cars--which you can really feel noticeably during the summer.

Everyone knows that cars contribute to global warming by putting heat TRAPPING gases into the atmosphere. But my worry is that cars heat the earth even more directly than that. If you walk past a running car, especially during the summer, you feel a large, constant, extremely hot wind shooting at you (and the bigger the car, the bigger the blast). Cyclists of course will know exactly what I'm talking about, they feel it more often and more directly since they share closer quarters with cars. Stop at a red light on your bike among a bunch of stopped cars and you feel like they're actually trying to kill you.

So my concern is that that heat amounts to real thermal pollution that directly contributes to global warming. I mean, I'm not a scientist but I know that heat energy doesn't simply go away.

I don't know how to draw attention to this (or, as hinted, whether it really calls for attention). Someone (Aaron N., I think) once suggested to me that I write to the Columbia Earth Institute about it, and I did, but they didn't seem interested.

Anyone know anything about the environmental effects of this particular huge source of heat energy, or whether it requires action?

August 18, 2009 at 12:25 pm | Link | #2

Anon: The heat given off by cars also has local effects. How much does that heat contribute to urban summer temperatures and therefore air conditioning costs? Surely millions of heaters roaming around the city must do something to the local air temperature. There is a per-tree cooling factor, why not a per-car factor?

And then there is the basic quality of life impact of that heat on anyone outside or without a/c.

And the added heat by all those parking lots in new residential developments, required by NYC zoning instead of traditional front and back yards....

August 18, 2009 at 12:41 pm | Link | #3

reb: The thermal pollution is likely significant on a local basis, but the list of pollutants produced by cars is much longer than that. Water pollution from thousands of tons of rubber dust loaded with PAHs and thousands of gallons heavy metal laden oil from crankcase drippings that drain directly into our rivers and bays. Noise pollution. Land and groundwater pollution from leaking underground fuel storage tanks, illegal dumping, and unrecyclable materials used in the construction of the car. Plus unaccounted air pollution from auto manufacturing, oil refining, and road construction. Of course there are other unaccounted for pollutants that stem from the economic over development required to support auto usage.

August 18, 2009 at 1:23 pm | Link | #4

ddartley: Mmm, reb, my mouth is watering thinking of all that chemical death we know as "freedom." I guess my specific question is, is the thermal pollution I'm talking about a global--rather than local--issue? Does it contribute to actual global warming?

And by the way, I love Charlie's article.

August 18, 2009 at 1:35 pm | Link | #5

James: The real "bloated bum" is the one attached to his corpulent, gross body. I live on the stretch of Broadway that he uses to cheat the toll. Next time I get shortness of breath from an asthma attack in my apartment, or that butterflies-in-the-stomach fight or flight feeling from all the honking, I'll be able to put a face on just who I should thank. Disgusting.

One thing I do wonder is why a congestion idea proposal that cordons off the entire city (rather than just Manhattan) was never floated by Bloomberg. Put the cordons at the Bronx/Westchester line, the Queens/Nassau Line, and at all river crossings to Jersey. This would pit the parochial outer borough pals against their suburban counterparts and reinforce the fact that the outer boroughs are part of the city and not just inner suburbs (which is how a lot of outer Borough residents believe the Manhattan elite perceives them). It would also remove the incentive for people like this guy to use neighborhood streets as cut-through routes to the CBD.

August 18, 2009 at 1:38 pm | Link | #6

J: The cordon around NYC is an interesting proposal, although it still give a free ride to the majority of car commuters who drive from the outer boroughs to Manhattan. This would drive Westchester and Long Island politicians nuts, making it harder to get through state senate and assembly but easier to get through city council. Seeing as NYC passed the original congestion pricing, it seems unlikely that the state would pass an entire city cordon.

Here's a better idea. NYC secedes from New York state. We bring in the most taxes for the state, yet receive the least benefits. I know Larry Littlefield has brought this up many times. We'd get bus cameras, congestion pricing, and two US senators. We could tax the hell out of Ed Fay for insisting on driving into Manhattan. We'd lose, uhh... upstate and Long Island.

August 18, 2009 at 2:12 pm | Link | #7

Streetsman: All Fay did is prove: 1. That small increases in pricing can discourage unnecessary auto trips, meaning the fundamental theory behind congestion pricing works. and 2. That the currently untolled crossing options can and do encourage suburban commuter traffic to travel through the local streets of residential neighborhoods like the Harlem and the South Bronx, where the asthma rate is the highest in the country

It's amazing to me that politicians in these neighborhoods came out in vehement opposition to congestion pricing. Either they don't get it or they don't care.

August 18, 2009 at 2:49 pm | Link | #8

Kaja: They both don't get it and don't care. It won't affect their re-elections.

August 18, 2009 at 4:45 pm | Link | #9

vnm: Komanoff, thanks for a great post. This is spot on.

August 18, 2009 at 7:01 pm | Link | #10

Josh: I agree with you, but you're not going to bring many skeptics on board with made-up terms like "time pollution."

August 18, 2009 at 7:09 pm | Link | #11

gecko: #2 ddartley, "... that the heat amounts to real thermal pollution that directly contributes to global warming..."

Read in NY Times some time back that the amount of heat put out by a car in a few minutes is the on the order of that required to heat a house just to give an idea of the wasted heat.

Regarding thermal pollution in places like New York City, the heat island effect contributes a huge amount and raises the local temperature by about ten degrees. Local lore among sailors on Long Island sound has it that for every acre of concrete added to New York, the afternoon winds coming from the city were delayed (or moved forward, can't remember) by a measurable fraction of a second. Cynthia Rosenzweig might be a good contact person at Columbia's Earth Institute and she was one of the contributors to "Managing the Megacity for Global Sustainability: The New York Metropolitan Region as an Urban Biosphere Reserve" published by the New York Academy of Sciences.

About 6,000 times the amount of solar energy hits the earth each day that is required for our energy needs, so it seems that the heat given off by cars probably does not have much of an effect except locally. There would be a net cooling effect if all the coal power plants were converted to solar but, from what I understand it would not be large.

We just should not be burning stuff to produce energy; that is for heating our homes, producing electricity which is also used for air conditioning, or transportation.

August 19, 2009 at 7:09 am | Link | #12

gecko: #13, gecko (continued), Heat is just distributed kinetic energy (energy associated with movement) and there are natural systems that can concentrate this kinetic energy. Winds are one form where tropical cyclones (hurricanes) and tornados are extreme cases of extremely concentrated kinetic energy and harnessing this terrific energy are very interesting design problems with potentially some very elegant solutions. Sailboats, windmills, and wind turbines are well-known examples on much smaller scales.

August 19, 2009 at 7:23 am | Link | #13

Ian Turner: Hi Gecko, Please note, that wind, including tornados and hurricanes, is caused by differences in temperature rather than by absolute temperature. It is not possible to structure or concentrate heat in a system of uniform temperature without adding more energy. This thanks to the 2nd law of thermodynamics.

Because of this principle, it is not possible to create a "reverse heater", which sucks heat out of your house and converts it into electricity.

August 19, 2009 at 7:50 am | Link | #14

gecko: #15 Ian Turner, "wind ... caused by differences in temperature rather than by absolute temperature..." It is not clear what you mean by absolute temperature. Yes, differences in temperature can cause wind and convection and exist naturally in various forms.

From what I understand high sea surface temperatures along with high sheer winds tend to produce conditions conducive to tropical cyclone formation, another natural wind or kinetic energy amplification system. The distributed kinetic energy or heat is converted to the kinetic concentrating kinetic energy of winds 200 miles per hour and more, producing a net modest cooling effect. The cooling effect would be much more dramatic if the winds (high kinetic energy) could be prevented from being converted back to heat by frictional effects. In effect, tropical cyclones would be giant air conditioners if the high winds were not converted by to heat by friction which is normally the situation.

August 19, 2009 at 8:15 am | Link | #15

gecko: #16, gecko (continued), To further clarify, it is generally recognized that high sea surface temperatures provide the energy for tropical cyclones.

August 19, 2009 at 8:21 am | Link | #16

Komanoff: Author replies to Dartley, James, Streetsman & Gecko --

Dartley: I, too, wrote to Columbia U. about the "heat-island" issue. Except that I wrote 39 years ago (I kid you not, around the time of Earth Day. My concern was more local than global, but otherwise similar to yours. I never heard back. I'm curious what the Earth Institute wrote back to you ... but I suspect that heat emissions from car engines are small potatoes on a global scale.

James & Streetsman: You both brought up asthma, and I know asthma is a major concern, particularly in poor communities, and justly so. But autos, esp'ly late-model ones, are so much cleaner (tailpipe-wise) than they used to be, that their emissions are almost certainly no more than a minor contributor to your or other asthma sufferers' health problems.

Gecko: You wrote, "Read in NY Times some time back that the amount of heat put out by a car in a few minutes is the on the order of that required to heat a house just to give an idea of the wasted heat." I'm imagining what you're talking about. A home furnace running at capacity processes around the same amount of Btu's as an urban auto -- around 30,000 Btu an hour. So your assertion appears off by an order of magnitude if not more -- not helpful!

All: I encourage awareness about cars in NYC to take a good look at the "Cost-Benefit" worksheet tab within the BTA (my original post has a link to the BTA spreadsheet). You'll see that, apart from the revenue generation, by far the biggest category of congestion pricing benefits is the time savings to drivers and other road users. Focusing on these isn't just intellectually honest; it's probably the best way to communicate the meaning and benefits of congestion pricing to the public and policy-makers.

August 19, 2009 at 9:22 pm | Link | #17

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