

Wednesday, February 27, 2008

Teddy's Last Jam

93-year-old Theodore Kheel wants to make mass transit free.
 By Matt Elzweig

Print Send Share Comment Font Font Size

Ted Kheel's not wearing a watch. At 93 years old, what's the point?

To any New Yorker over 50, Kheel is a household name—or was—because he understood that it didn't matter what time it was; the clock was always ticking, a deadline always loomed. As the city's chief labor negotiator through the 1960s and 1970s, he helped settle urgent strikes by teachers, transit workers and cops that threatened to paralyze the city he loved. He believed the often distant gap between belligerent workers and a cash-strapped city government, and averted crisis after crisis with his conciliatory methods.

Now, as he sits in his fifth floor office on East 55th Street, he has another deadline ahead of him—perhaps his last, and perhaps the most important of his career. If he could see down to the busy streets below, he would be able to point out, to his beloved, the crisis that has engaged his passion since the 1960s: the growing gridlock that has turned his visitor, metropolis into a teeming mass of moving vehicles—or, more to the point, stalled vehicles stuck in a congested mess that threatens to overwhelm New York in the years to come.

Kheel saw the crisis building long before anyone else, and decades before Mayor Bloomberg turned "congestion pricing" into a buzzword for change. And now, as politicians scramble for sides in the likely battle over the mayor's proposal to charge a toll on cars coming into Manhattan, the man in the white turtleneck and dark suit—possessed of a vast trove of energy that belies his age—has a proposal that will shock New Yorkers with its boldness, anger politicians with its simplicity and annoy experts with its impracticality.

He wants to make the New York City mass transit system free of charge. No Metrocards, no toll booths, no monthly passes, no transfers. He wants all of us to be able to descend into the subway without a nickel to our name, and travel the length of our city at no expense. Perhaps he knows, in his still-beating, still-passionate heart that it will never happen, but he can't help himself. He believes it's the only way to save the city from the ominous prospect of overcrowding: to offer an economic subsidy to the needy New Yorkers who face, next month, yet another rise in transit fares, the 14th in 60 years.

This is Ted Kheel's last stand.

The underlying argument of the Kheel plan—presented to the public at a Carriage House breakfast in January with his friend and fellow city legend, retired NBC reporter Gabe Pressman, at his side—is that with congestion pricing, the city can pay for the transit system, so riders won't have to. Kheel has taken the cornerstone of his proposal, first offered to the city in 1971, and attached it to the Bloomberg administration's congestion pricing model, only doubling it. Instead of an \$8 toll for cars entering the most congested neighborhoods of Midtown, Kheel proposes a \$16 fee. His plan also includes a 25 percent increase in cab fares, and would raise curbside parking fees.

But in keeping with the liberal, pro-government stance that has defined his entire career in city life, the Kheel plan puts City Hall squarely in charge of taxing the rich to help the poor.

Here's the difference. The London-inspired plan detailed in Mayor Bloomberg's plan calls for an \$8 daily toll on passenger vehicles "entering or leaving Manhattan below 86th Street," and \$21 for trucks, from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. during the week. There would be no fees on the FDR Drive, the West Side Highway or West Street. Vehicles driving only within the city's central business district would pay half price. In Kheel's plan, the fee for passenger vehicles is double that: \$16 for cars, and \$32 for commercial vehicles. Although drivers are charged only for entering the Midtown area (the Kheel proposal involves only 19 tolls, contrasted with 340 in the Bloomberg plan), the fees apply 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

By doubling the Bloomberg price tag on cars and trucks, Kheel believes, the city can afford to cut subway and bus fares to nothing—the crux of his seemingly crazy proposal.

"The evidence is clear: If the price of mass transportation goes up, more people switch to automobiles. If congestion pricing goes up, more people switch to mass transportation... We're not against congestion pricing, but we think it's only half of the problem."

The proposal may seem like an attempt by Kheel to upstage the mayor at fixing congestion, but Kheel—who last served the city in an official capacity in 1982—believes he shares with the mayor an idealized view of the city's future. And there may be some truth to that, Bloomberg told WABC radio's John Gambling in March 2007 that "from a public policy point of view, you really should have all of your mass transit free. And then raise fines and parking fees and everything else." During his weekly broadcast, the mayor has made the same point at least two more times, calling free mass transit "the ultimate system," and most recently calling it "the perfect system," on the February 1, 2008 broadcast.

"Right now, the mayor—I think he's a good mayor and congestion pricing is a good thing," Kheel says. "He did mention at one point that free would be great. So I think this is something that the people [will] come to appreciate when they think about it... and how good it will be for working people and for the people who drive because there'll be more using mass transit."

Kheel's vision for a fare-free New York goes something like this: In a New York where subways, buses and even commuter trains are free to ride, and motorists pay for the system through congestion pricing, pedestrians would be able to get around much easier, breathe cleaner air and, as he puts it, "every working person who uses the subway would have \$1,000 more a year to spend."

In Kheel's romanticized view of a New York without Metrocards and congestion, residents would be more productive because they'd spend less time inching along in traffic. Stores would do more business, since people would have more time and more money to shop with and because so many businesses are located around subway stations, there would be more public space that would, in effect, turn New York into a walking city with wider sidewalks and public plazas. More working class and poor New Yorkers in the outer boroughs would be able to commute to work, which would increase productivity and offer them a chance to improve their financial situations and lifestyles, which would in turn improve the economy and society as a whole. And with fewer cars and trucks, and more bikers and walkers, there would be fewer auto accidents, which would lower insurance costs.

But could it work? For all his theoretical support for free mass transit, Bloomberg told Gambling during the February 1, 2008 broadcast that, it's "not realistic."

Security is among the many objections raised by equally rabid realists. They point to the Staten Island Ferry, where free rides have encouraged increased vandalism. If subway stations were open to everyone, critics say, the same problem could occur. People would flock in droves to the stations. Regardless of their intent, an open house combined with congestion pricing could mean lots more people. And more people require more crowd control. Where would the additional police presence come from and who would pay for it?

And would subway cars suddenly become packed morning, noon, day and night? Could an already-overworked subway system handle the 28,000 potential new riders brought into the system by Kheel? Kheel expects 32,000 current peak-time riders to switch to other modes of transportation, which "slightly more than offset," the new riders. The bulk of them will switch to the commuter lines, which will be discounted, and the free buses, which will be faster since there will be fewer cars on the streets. He expects that 5,000 peak-time subway commuters who live near or in the central business district will start walking or biking to work instead.

In the end, Kheel insists, there will be 4 percent more space per passenger on the subway under his plan. George Haikalis, a transportation planner and civil engineer who managed the Kheel study, says that there are now at least 1,000 new subway cars being built, with another 1,000 old cars marked for death that are, by his calculation, still salvageable. Haikalis also says that the tracks can handle more trains at peak hours—all except the Lexington Avenue Express and the E and F trains in parts of Queens.

But there are other, unanswered questions. What will happen to the MTA employees left idle by the Kheel plan? ("We envision no decrease," the Kheel report says.) And how likely is it that anyone will approve a plan that charges drivers \$16 to enter the city at 4:30 a.m. on a Sunday? Given the high cost—and the possibility that some businesses might opt out of a mid-Manhattan base in light of it—how can the Kheel team be so certain that congestion pricing revenue could pay for the transit system, year after year?

Dr. Michael Horodniceanu, a former commissioner for the city's Bureau of Traffic, and now CEO of Urbitran, a planning, design and engineering firm, doesn't "believe in the long run it could work without being supported by tax dollars." He is intrigued by the concept, which he calls "bold," and has a lot of respect for the Kheel authors, whom he says are "smart people." But he thinks definitive studies are needed to see if free mass transit could work for New York. To describe certain parts of the Kheel proposal, he uses the term "half-baked."

Kheel is well aware that many questions remain to be answered, and many potential problems are still to be solved. In fact, he concedes that he doesn't expect his plan to be approved. Still, he embraces free transit as a mantra, much as he has for decades, without the slightest doubt in his firm, congregator's voice.

"This is the solution," Kheel says. "And the city is going to have more people ... another two million people. And I am convinced this is going to happen. I'm not convinced it's going to happen this year. I know there are lots of things that need to be done to make a change of this sort, but the basic concept is sound. And it's good for the drivers and good for the people who use the subways. It's a sound approach to a very serious problem that exists throughout the world."

After talking about his proposal for the better part of an hour, Kheel says he has to leave. He's on his way to Gotham Hall, the cavernous bank-turned-event space in Midtown Manhattan, to attend a fashion show that will benefit Earth Pledge, an environmental group he is president of and founded in the early 1990s.

He will not be taking the subway. The only immediate sign of age is the bad back that requires Kheel to walk with a cane and an extra hand or two to get where he's going, and which forces his athletic frame into a crouch when he stands up. He's traded subway cars and buses for a car and driver that takes him to appointments. It's a typically busy day for Kheel, who's up every morning in his East 61st Street apartment at 8:30, at work from 9:30 to 6 or 7, and up till at least 10 p.m. (He likes to end each day with a viewing of The Colbert Report)

When Kheel was born in Brooklyn in 1914, the first New York City subway line had only been in existence for 10 years, and single ticket fares cost a nickel—the equivalent of about 70 cents today, according to the Kheel report. The fare stayed put until 1948 when it doubled, the equivalent of 85 cents. But between 1948 and 1995, it was increased 13 times, and in 2003, it went from \$1.50 to \$2. The hike scheduled for March 2, 2008, will not increase the current \$2 fare, but will raise one-day passes to \$7.50 from \$7, seven-day passes to \$25 from \$24, monthlies to \$81 from \$76, and the MTA will introduce a new 14-day pass for \$47.

Kheel's advocacy for free mass transit and congestion pricing grew out of his work with the transit system as an arbitrator. He was the city's official mediator for Transit Authority disputes for more than three decades; he resolved some 30,000 labor conflicts during and after that period. As such, Kheel is no stranger to public crusades and controversy and has been fighting to keep transit fares down since the 1960s with a zeal that borders on obsession. "If I was half my current age, I'd run for mayor on a ticket for free mass transportation" he says in his slow but solid way of speaking.

But are free mass transit and congestion pricing actually the soul mates that the Kheel plan claims they are? Or is it Kheel's final salvo—his one last stab at immortality?

When asked if he sees the proposal as his legacy, he laughs a little.

"I don't know," Kheel says. "I haven't thought much about the legacy. Once you're gone, you're gone."

It's either false modesty or, from what interviews with one of his five daughters (he also has a son), his assistant and reams of newsprint overwhelmingly suggest, it's a gross understatement. (His wife Ann, whom he married the day after he passed the bar exam, died in 2003.) Whatever his motivations, Kheel has generally been known as a forward-thinking, optimistic altruist.

But after he was forced out by Mayor Ed Koch, who considered him excessively pro-labor, his profile began to shrink. While the lifetime New Yorker remained a highly respected figure, he was no longer the same Ted Kheel who, along with Mayor Robert Wagner, ended a 114-day newspaper strike in 1963 when federal mediators gave up. He was no longer the same Ted Kheel who, as the first chairman of Edmund J. Safra's Republic National Bank of New York, arranged for Robert F.

Kennedy to cut the ribbon on the building when it opened in 1966. And he was no longer the same Theodore Kheel whose Park Avenue law firm The Washington Post called "a center of power in New York which commands the respect of labor and the city's leading politicians," in 1980. But he continued to settle labor disputes after leaving public office and then became concerned with environmental issues in the 1990s with sustainable development as his focus.

Here are some facts Kheel likes to cite when campaigning for free transit.

Increased traffic congestion will soon cost the city as much as \$13 billion a year. At an average of 7.9 miles per hour, New York City buses are slower than Chicago's (9.7), Boston's (10.5), Washington, DC's (11.2) and Los Angeles's (12.3). According to a study conducted by New York City Transit (part of the MTA), 133.50 million subway riders in October 2006 became 143.50 million riders in October 2007, that's an increase of one million people per month in just a year's time.

With this kind of congestion, it's difficult to fault Ted Kheel for feeling a sense of urgency, whatever the practical limitations of his plan may be.

And despite the doubts, there's no question Kheel has captured some support for his plan. Robert Abrams, a former Bronx borough president and state Attorney General, has not read Ted Kheel's proposal, but he began pushing for mass transit as soon as he was sworn in as Bronx borough president in 1970—angered by what in a New York Times article he called then-Governor Nelson Rockefeller's "disgraceful acquiescence to the transit fare increase" from 20 cents to 30 cents. Abrams says he now believes that "mass transit is inextricably tied to the health of the economy."

"[It's] no mistake that Bloomingdale's is located where it's located," Abrams says. Real estate values go up the closer they are to mass transit, he explains—which is why Abrams doesn't think the system should have to be financed only by the riders. Either the burden should be shared, he says, or the city should pick up the entire tab.

"Basic vital services are provided by the government," Abrams argues. "The police department, the fire department, the parks, sanitation—why not transit?"

Kheel sent copies of the plan to Mayor Bloomberg and Governor Eliot Spitzer along with a letter he signed, laying it on thick, by calling them "courageous reformers" but questioning their support of transit-fare increases, as "a policy that drives commuters back to the car, effectively nullifying the very result you are seeking to achieve through congestion pricing."

They never wrote back.

★ RATING AVERAGE READER RATING ★★★★★

COMMENTS SHARE YOUR OPINION

Write a comment

Show comments

Also in Features News:

- Flower Power to the Rescue
- Healthy Manhattan: Depression Has Company During the Holidays
- HEALTHY MANHATTAN: Eating a Little Healthier for the Holidays
- HEALTHY MANHATTAN: It's Also Flu Season
- Brooklyn's New Politics
- Diagnosis in Question
- Raging Skull
- Free at La\$!
- Lost on Hart Island
- The Benign Good News

Text to search

Make FIRST DATES CAN BE AWKWARD. ESPECIALLY WHEN YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO WITH YOUR HANDS. WE'VE GOT YOU COVERED.

(212) 362-0550
makemeaning.com

candles · soap · glass · ceramics · jewelry · paper

Sign up for the NYPress e-newsletter for weekly updates and exciting event info:

Privacy by SafeSubscribe™

Calendar Bar/Club/Lounge

Mon 31	Tue 1	Wed 2	Thu 3	Fri 4	Sat 5	Sun 6
--------	-------	-------	-------	-------	-------	-------

Search in Events

Event Name:

Category:

FEEDBACK
 NEW YORK PRESS PODCAST
 click here to listen

READ IT... cityArts
new york's review of culture

MOST READ **MOST COMMENT** **MOST EMAILED**

- Flavor of the Week: Have you Noticed your Balls?
- Genuine Anarchy
- 8 Million Stories: Gangs of New York
- Up against the Wall!
- The Woodmans
- Havana Good Time
- Condo Moves In
- Bash Compactor: Amber Waves of Pain
- Retail Politics
- Sign Language Astrology: 1.27.11-2.2.11

Stiff Drinks *Great Eats*

146 WYTHE AVE • WILLIAMSBURGH
 718.388.5328 • NITANITABK.COM

Content powered by

Belleville
 Brooklyn
 Cambria Heights
 Cliffside Park
 East Elmhurst
 Flushing
 Garfield
 Hackensack
 Howard Beach
 Linden
 Long Island City
 Manhasset
 North Bergen

NY PRESS PRESENTS THE NEW AMSTERDAM BICYCLE SHOW
 BENEFITTING TRANSPORTATION ALTERNATIVES

For top New York hotel deals

Ads by Google

Los Angeles Coupons
 1 ridiculously huge coupon a day. It's like doing L.A. at 90% off!
www.Groupon.com/Los-Ang

Laptops Sold for \$39.99
 Today: All HP Laptops are Sold for up to 98% Off. Buy Yours Today?
Quibids.com

Bus Routes
 Get access to schedules, routes, maps & fares with a free guide!
Buses.Inbox.com

Rent Charter Buses
 Free quotes, Great Rates, Call Now
 Group&Event Charters All Occasions
800-983-9618-www.coachsl

Compare Chevrolet Express
 Research, Compare, and Build Your Express on the Official Site Now.
www.Chevrolet.com/Express

DEAL OF THE WEEK

Jumpstart your business online and **SAVE BIG**