

A Solution to New York City's Gridlock

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ABSTRACT (ENGLISH)

Midtown traffic for the United Nations General Assembly is a reminder of the need for a plan to cut traffic and fund mass transit by adding tolls.

FULL TEXT

New York commuters ably survived the “summer of hell” that Gov. Andrew Cuomo had forecast because of repair work at the hobbled Pennsylvania Station. Now Manhattan is enduring a different form of hellishness: severe Midtown traffic as the United Nations General Assembly convenes and world leaders gather. It’s a familiar late-summer headache. But it’s likely to be worse than usual this time, with extra streets closed off as protection for President Trump, ensconced for several days in his Fifth Avenue aerie.

What better moment than when bumpers nuzzle bumpers to be reminded of the need to reduce traffic in the business heart of the city through a redesigned system of tolls known as congestion pricing.

The concept has been embraced belatedly by Mr. Cuomo, who has yet to flesh out details of what his plan would look like.

The governor correctly sees it as a way to raise gobs of cash for the city’s ailing mass-transit network. But let’s not forget that the true goal of this pricing mechanism is embodied in its name: decongesting streets for the benefit of drivers and pedestrians — and their lungs.

The main idea in play for now is a plan put forth by Move NY . It would discourage cars and trucks from entering Manhattan south of 60th Street during peak business hours, in part by imposing tolls on four East River bridges that are now free. (Lost in the mists of time is the fact that the bridges once had tolls. Mayor William Gaynor got rid of them in 1911.) As compensation, tolls on outer bridges like the Verrazano-Narrows and the Throgs Neck would be lowered. Electronic sensors would make it possible for the fees to be adjusted according to the time of day. There’s no reason they could not be sharply lowered, even eliminated, late at night or on weekends.

Anyone observing traffic on the toll-free bridges can see vast numbers of cars that carry only the person behind the wheel. Many people drive into Midtown and Lower Manhattan because they bear no cost other than the price of gas.

Naturally, this proposal has resisters, notably politicians representing Brooklyn, Queens and the eastern suburbs, whose constituents take to cars more than Manhattan or Bronx residents do. No one pretends that getting Albany’s required approval is a cinch.

Bill de Blasio, the city’s Brooklyn-philic mayor, has his own objections. He describes congestion pricing as a “regressive tax” on lower-income drivers, unfairly making them pay the same toll as the wealthy. The mayor prefers what he describes as a “millionaires tax” to raise money for the subways.

The reality, however, is that New York car owners tend to be better off. For starters, more than half the households in the city are carless, according to a census analysis by the Tri-State Transportation Campaign . The median household income of those with wheels is more than double that of those without — \$85,000 compared with \$40,630. Writing in The Daily News on Sunday, Veronica Vanterpool, executive director of the tri-state campaign, said, “A regressive transportation policy is what we have now: a system that favors free travel by drivers and ignores the environmental, social and economic costs of car-clogged city streets.”

We agree. Besides, there’s nothing regressive about plowing toll revenue into improvements for mass transit, which is how most low- and middle-income New Yorkers get around. Some might even call it progressive.

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