

Newsday

Fare deal for congestion

Bloomberg's vision deserves regional support, not reactionary carping

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Predictably, much of the early reaction to Mayor Michael Bloomberg's visionary Earth Day speech has focused on its most controversial component: congestion pricing. In both substance and scope, that criticism is misplaced.

Bloomberg deserves high marks for his insight that right now, with the city's finances in good shape, is the best time to start thinking seriously about New York City's future. That is the rationale for PlaNYC, a project that is devising a sustainable plan for a city of 8.2 million inhabitants, expected to have almost a million more by 2030.

To keep the city going as it grows, to prevent it from choking on its exhaust fumes and its traffic, Bloomberg proposes 127 initiatives in such areas as housing, water, open space, transportation, parks, energy and global warming. He wisely aims for a broad strategy on climate change, which poses a real threat to our region's vulnerable coastal city.

Despite the plan's breadth, the negative comments focus laser-like on congestion pricing. Those with vision, like Nassau County Executive Thomas Suozzi, support it. Those with smaller constituencies and minds like to call it a tax. But this is really a voluntary user fee.

The fee pays for the privilege of driving a car into the incredibly crowded area of Manhattan below 86th Street, in the weekday hours from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. If you already pay round-trip tolls, it won't affect you. In any case, you can avoid it by taking mass transit. And the plan would use the revenue for capital projects all over the region, including the transit element of the Nassau Hub proposal, East Side LIRR access, and others.

That clever strategy might help get Albany to approve a three-year pilot for congestion pricing. But it won't be easy. Too bad Gov. Eliot Spitzer didn't choose to give Bloomberg a more steamroller-like boost now. Still, the idea has wide business, labor and environmental support.

It has worked in London, and it can work here. Beyond cutting the economic and environmental costs of Manhattan congestion, it can help retail sales, reduce traffic jams near the free East River bridges (caused by those trying to avoid tolls), and curb air pollution. It may inconvenience a tiny minority, but it can benefit the whole region.
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