

# **Congestion pricing is an idea whose time has come**

## **Mike's PlaNYC echoes Council's vision in 1989**

by PETER VALLONE SR.

Wednesday, May 9th 2007, 4:00 AM

Mayor Bloomberg deserves the overwhelming support of all New Yorkers for his bold and necessary vision for the future of our town, as outlined in PlaNYC 2030. As the first empowered Speaker of the New York City Council, I outlined similar goals in 1989 when the Council Policy Unit published our vision for the city into the 21st century. In addition to affordable housing, clean energy and many other areas covered by PlaNYC 2030, the 1989 plan addressed the controversial issue of tolls on all city bridges, a precursor to congestion pricing.

A distinguished panel of New Yorkers working with Mayor Koch tried to convince me and the Council that the additional money generated by tolls was necessary for immediate and long-term improvements to mass transportation. At that time, however, the technology did not exist to eliminate the traffic and pollution that would be caused by an increased number of toll booths (a problem solved today by E-ZPass). In addition, it was (and is) essential that the tolls for New York City residents were incorporated at a reduced rate or eliminated entirely where mass transit was not sufficient.

It is important to note that among Queens residents, 40% of workers work in Queens, 12% work in boroughs other than Manhattan, and 11% work outside the city. In addition, over 80% of the people who do live in Queens and work in the pricing zone currently get there by mass transit.

But here are three reasons all Queens residents should consider supporting this plan:

- 100% of revenues reinvested into mass transit improvements: By charging the few who do drive, the city will be able to raise billions of dollars to pour into better transit service for Queens. In the long-term, the mayor's plan calls for East Side Access and a Sunnyside LIRR station, more train capacity on the Queens Boulevard subway, a ferry from the Rockaways to Manhattan, the Jamaica-to-Lower Manhattan rail link and the third track for the LIRR. These will all be a boon for Queens commuters. In the near future, we can expect more frequent local stops by LIRR trains, modernized subway stations, more express buses with improved service, and ferry service between Long Island City and Manhattan.
- Improvements in underserved communities before the plan begins: Many will still clamor that these projects are years from completion. What about today and people who have to commute by car? The mayor knows that to get his way on congestion pricing, he's going to have to ante up. To that end, he has identified the 10 Queens communities where an above-average number of residents drive to work in Manhattan. As proof of good faith and to ensure that these people are not unduly burdened, the city will work with the MTA to rapidly improve transit

service to these neighborhoods before a congestion charge goes into effect. With Bus Rapid Transit, more frequent and improved express buses, more local buses extended into Manhattan and better connections to the LIRR, Queens commuters are going to reap the benefits of the congestion charge before a dollar is collected.

- An easier, less congested ride in Queens, too: Furthermore, by discouraging driving into Manhattan, congestion on all of our streets will ease. And with the money raised through the congestion charge, the city will be able to keep the roads in better shape. These benefits will result in considerable time savings for those who must drive anywhere in New York.

The time has come to seriously consider the mayor's proposal for congestion pricing and not just dismiss it simply because it may be politically unpopular. My many years of public service convince me that when you try to do the right thing you are bound to be criticized, but in the end making New York the greatest city in the world is more than enough reward.

Good government is not always good politics, but Mayor Bloomberg is definitely on the right track and his 2030 Plan deserves our serious consideration. Whether you drive, walk, bike, take a train, take a bus or take a ferry to get to work, you deserve better. Peter Vallone Sr. served as a City Councilman from Astoria from 1974 to 2001 and as City Council Speaker from 1986 to 2001.