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Congestion Pricing Opponents Blast Bridge Tolls Idea

BY JOHN TOSCANO

Opponents of congestion pricing last week blasted a special commission's proposal to place tolls on East River crossings as an unworkable idea.

Noting that Mayor Michael Bloomberg, champion of the congestion pricing proposal, first called for the tolls five years ago to plug a budget gap, Councilmember David Weprin said the idea had returned, now that the city is facing budget shortages again. "We should not be trying to finance a budget with sneaky, regressive user fees that will primarily affect working outer borough families," Weprin, the council Finance Committee chairman, declared.

Joining Weprin in his assault on the toll idea were former Woodside Councilmember Walter McCaffrey, James Trent of the boroughwide Queens Civic Congress, and Eastern Queens civic activist Corey Bearak.

McCaffrey, of Keep NYC Congestion Tax Free, stated: "It is time for the Traffic Mitigation Commission to accept the public's concerns and put forward only those traffic plans that do not create onerous and costly burdens on our city and its residents."

Trent added, "New Yorkers deserve better than promises about better mass transit that cannot be kept when they are again being asked to shell out more for less."

The congestion pricing commission has been holding public hearings on Bloomberg's proposal to charge cars an \$8 fee to enter the Manhattan central business district below 86th Street to drastically cut traffic congestion.

Beside the bridge toll proposal issued in the commission's interim report, other variations on the \$8 fee were also advanced.

Weprin (D- Hollis), a leading opponent of Bloomberg's plan, said the commission also spoke of a "lock box" idea to squirrel funds away for mass transit improvements.

But, McCaffrey stated, "The people of New York have never been given a lock box assurance that the money will be dedicated to mass transit improvements."

Also blasting that proposal, Weprin said, "We don't want a situation like the lottery, where 100 percent of the money is going to education and 100 percent that was in the budget before is now being taken out [of the budget]."

Returning to his opposing bridge tolls, Weprin said it was estimated in 2003 that a toll would affect 200,000 commuters from Queens and Brooklyn. But, he pointed out, "Any modest reduction in the number of cars [going into Manhattan] could cause a decline of well over \$1.5 billion annually in economic activity and a potential loss of 15,000 jobs."