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Commuters pan congestion pricing

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A compromise on congestion pricing, to charge drivers to cross Manhattan's 60th Street instead of 86th Street, still irks Lower Hudson Valley commuters who say the benefits - reducing traffic while raising funds for improvements to mass transit - just don't outweigh their costs, literally.

"It's a horrible decision," said Jason Allison, 29, of White Plains. "They are taking away from middle-class people. **You'll have to be rich to drive into the city.**"

The 17-member commission charged with tackling New York City's gridlock endorsed a scaled-back version of Mayor Michael Bloomberg's proposal Thursday.

The original plan would charge cars \$8 to enter Manhattan below 86th Street or \$4 to travel within the "congestion zone" between 6 a.m. and 6 p.m. weekdays. The new plan moves the boundary 26 blocks south, eliminates the \$4 in-zone charge and provides an exemption for low-emission trucks. However, it increases rates at parking meters and charges an additional \$1 for taxi trips within the zone and a \$1 processing fee for drivers who don't use E-ZPass.

Assemblyman Richard Brodsky, D-Greenburgh, was one of two dissenters on the Traffic Congestion Mitigation Commission, denouncing the plan as a **"regressive tax on middle-class New Yorkers."**

Almost half of the estimated 148,000 New York City-bound commuters from Westchester, Rockland and Putnam counties drive in.

The New York City Council would need to approve the plan before it could go to the state Legislature for a final vote, something state Sen. Thomas Morahan, R-New City, doubts will happen.

"I just don't like that money is going to dictate who gets the access," he said, adding that he plans to vote against the plan. **"The people who are kept out will be backfilled by the people who can easily afford the \$8."**

Drivers with or without E-ZPass who cross the Tappan Zee Bridge en route to Manhattan also would end up paying both a bridge toll and full congestion-pricing fee.

Some bus and train commuters have concerns of their own, complaining they already struggle to find parking at crowded stations, a situation bound to worsen with an influx of diverted drivers.

Carolyn Daly, a Suffern native and member of Keep NYC Congestion Tax Free, a grass-roots group against the plan, thinks **congestion pricing would exacerbate problems on Metro-North Railroad,**

Long Island Rail Road and NJ Transit.

"The bottom line is that the trains are already crowded," she said.

While acknowledging that some **express trains and station parking lots are at capacity**, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority has strongly supported congestion pricing, arguing that the long-term benefits outweigh any short-term costs, said Jeremy Soffin, MTA spokesman.

The MTA projects 3,000 weekday drivers could be diverted onto Metro-North trains, which Soffin calls "very manageable, a relatively small bump" of less than 1 percent of current ridership.

"The great thing about the concept of congestion pricing is that it removes enough cars from the roads to have a very big impact without straining the transportation system," he said.

The \$354 million federal grant that would come with New York's passing a congestion-pricing plan by the end of March, and the projected \$491 million in annual funds raised by the fees, would go toward capital improvements to mass transit, including expanding station parking facilities, he said.

Environmentalist Andy Darrell, regional director of the nonprofit Environmental Defense and a member of the commission, said, "We may never again have a chance to address our congestion and pollution problems so effectively."

If the City Council approves the plan, its success in Albany could rest with Democratic Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver, who said Thursday that the Legislature needed more assurances that congestion-fee revenue would be dedicated entirely to mass-transit improvements.

Silver also called for a plan to give poor households state and city tax credits for the congestion fees and asked for details on how the additional revenue from parking meters would be spent.

Assemblywoman Nancy Calhoun, R-Blooming Grove, whose district includes northern Rockland and parts of Orange County, said fellow lawmakers had told her "not to worry" because "there would be many opportunities to derail it."

"I don't think it has enough support," she said.

How commuters get to NYC

Of 147,908 commuters from the Lower Hudson Valley: 49 percent drive, 36 percent take a train and 8 percent take a bus. The breakdown:

Northern Westchester/Putnam: Of 37,888 commuters, 48 percent drive; 47 percent take a train; 1 percent take a bus.

Southern Westchester: Of 90,394 commuters, 49 percent drive; 7 percent take a bus; 37 percent take a train.

Rockland: Of 19,626 commuters, 61 percent drive; 25 percent take a bus; 10 percent take a train.

Note: includes workers 16 and older who work in New York City and their usual means of transportation.

Sources: American Community Survey 2006, University of Minnesota's IPUMS project, Journal News analysis