



Staten Island Advance

Rightful suspicion

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STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE -- If you want a measure of how little trust New Yorkers have for state and city government -- not to mention the Metropolitan Transportation Authority -- all you need to do is look at the results of a startling poll on the issue of congestion-pricing this week.

The Quinnipiac University Polling Institute found that 50 percent of New Yorkers statewide generally oppose Mayor Michael Bloomberg's controversial congestion-pricing plan for Manhattan; 33 percent support it.

That breakdown pretty much holds up across the board -- for men and women, Republicans and Democrats, whites and blacks.

However, the Quinnipiac pollsters qualified a second question on the issue so it asked, "Would you support congestion pricing if the money were used to improve mass transit in and around New York City?"

That qualification produced a remarkable flip among respondents. Some 60 percent of voters statewide said they would support congestion-pricing on those terms; just 30 percent were still opposed.

New York City residents support it as long as the money is spent on mass transit by a margin of 67-27 percent. Even respondents in city suburbs, who some say will be most affected by the fee to drive into Manhattan during peak hours, back the concept by a margin of 51-43 percent.

Then, the pollsters asked the killer question: "How likely do you think it is that the money from congestion pricing would be used to improve mass transit in and around New York City? Very likely, somewhat likely, not too likely or not likely at all?"

A scant 8 percent of those asked said it was "very likely"; 34 percent said it was "somewhat likely." A combined 54 percent said it was "not too likely" or "not likely at all."

Maurice Carroll, director of the Quinnipiac Polling Institute, said: "The clock is ticking on New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg's congestion-pricing plan. The State Legislature must act soon. New Yorkers don't like the idea unless the money goes to help mass transit. Then they approve. Would politicians really steer the money to mass transit? Half of us are skeptical."

That, in a nutshell, is the problem with the congestion-pricing scheme specifically (as it is with state and city government generally) as the April 7 deadline for the state Legislature to vote on the issue fast approaches.

Proponents of the plan have said from the start that apart from helping to reduce traffic in Manhattan south of 60th Street on weekdays, the congestion fee will raise about \$500 million a year that can be used to fund major mass transit improvements.

In addition, the federal government is prepared to award New York City a \$354-million grant to implement congestion-pricing and thus to serve as a model for other U.S. cities facing enormous traffic problems.

Advocates, from the mayor to City Council Speaker Christine Quinn to Senate Majority Leader Joseph Bruno to new Gov. David Paterson, have insisted that the huge amount of funding for mass transit is the most important component of the plan.

Most New Yorkers seem to agree and would be happy to support it because of that infusion for much-needed mass transit. The problem is that people don't really believe that's how the state, the city and the MTA will use the money. And that cynicism gives opponents, including suburban and outer-borough lawmakers, a lot of political leverage.

Officials have been trying to allay these suspicions by maintaining that the congestion fees will be placed in a "lockbox" and cannot be used for anything else.

But New Yorkers have witnessed state and city officials, eager for large caches of "earmarked revenue," find their way around such guarantees all too often in the past.

And there's also the Lottery Syndrome. Remember when the lottery was started? The big selling point was that all the revenue (aside from funding for the lottery administration) would be dedicated for education.

But once that built-in lottery windfall was in place, lawmakers decreased state and city subsidies for education and siphoned off money that they used to be forced to spend for other things. To a large degree, lottery revenue replaced state subsidies.

Might the same thing happen with the congestion-pricing windfall?

New York mass transit riders are already being asked to pay a larger portion of the cost of operating the MTA than riders in most other major American cities.

If the state decreases its already skimpy mass transit subsidy, how much will the congestion-pricing revenue really do?

"I think the public has every right to be skeptical," Mayor Bloomberg said, according to Newsday. "I can just tell you that I am giving the public my word that these monies will be used for mass transit for the next 646 days I'm in office and that I will do everything I can after that as a private citizen to make sure that...the MTA lives up to its commitment."

Maybe people believe him, but what about the next mayor? What about when the MTA faces

staggering operating deficits? What mass transit improvements will be forthcoming then?

That's why any legislation to enable congestion-pricing in the city must be written with ironclad guarantees that all the congestion fee revenue will go to mass transit, and that the state and city subsidies are locked in at acceptable levels, with no back doors, no escape hatches for officials eager to get their hands on this pot of revenue.

Short of those guarantees, April 7 may be a bad day for advocates of this farsighted plan.