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The Sun

Opinion

History for the Speaker



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April 4, 2008

In the late 1750s, fed up with steep tolls on the King's Bridge, then the only link between New York and the American mainland, the business community of the day underwrote the construction of the Farmers Free Bridge between Manhattan and what we now call the Bronx.

The opening was celebrated at the time by a great barbecue on New Years Day, 1759. In short order, the toll revenue dried up on the King's Bridge, and the levies were abandoned. The lure of free travel to the mainland turned out to be so compelling that a new road was shortly built connecting the new free bridge with the Boston and Albany Post Roads. It could be argued that this event was a key event in the development of New York as an economic power.

That is why the speaker of the Assembly, Sheldon Silver, has such a big choice to make on congestion pricing. He can, once again, be a giant killer and quash the congestion tax scheme being advanced by Mayor Bloomberg, as he did with the Olympic/Jets Stadium plan, another pet project of the mayor's.

A lot of people were fit to be tied when the speaker quashed the stadium plan, but today the Speaker looks smart for that decision. I believe that a similarly bold move on congestion pricing will ultimately be celebrated in the same way.

The narrow vote on the home rule message in the City Council Monday passed due to the unanimous support of the Bronx delegation members present. One of the eight, a supposedly committed opponent, was conveniently absent. Congestion pricing is wildly unpopular in the Bronx, but a deal was struck with the county Democratic boss, Jose Rivera, that saved the day.

The last time the mayor made a deal with Mr. Rivera, it cost taxpayers \$250-million in increased water taxes to lure Bronx officials with park project pork, so that they would drop their opposition to a controversial multi-billion dollar water filtration plant.

Before Monday there were only two supporters among the Bronx Council delegation for the congestion tax, Oliver Koppell of Riverdale and James Vacca of Throggs Neck, both having bought into the hype about "environmental benefits." Had the other six held firm (including Helen Foster, the curiously absent member), the vote would have been 26 to 25 against and failed.

The council members should have gone to London, where they'd have learned that more than half of the revenue of the London system goes to administration. The London fees are now around \$16. Unless we can somehow be wildly more efficient than they are, and no municipal project here that I'm familiar with ever is, our \$8 fee will quickly be eaten up by cost overruns.

And there's a dirty secret about the revenues. It isn't the \$8 that will bring in the revenue that we are promised will "revolutionize" mass transit, but, as with the quarters put in parking meters, the fines levied against those who didn't pay. In London, these account for about a third of all gross revenue.

So to reward Bronx Councilman Vacca for his loyalty, the mayor trekked to Throggs Neck to announce an express bus route between that community and Wall Street. Hardly a revolution. If there is demand for an express bus from Throggs Neck to Wall Street, do it tomorrow. We don't have to tax and fine motorists to the tune of billions for petty projects such as this.

Which brings me back to the Farmers Free Bridge. What the Bronx delegation voted for was the end of a 250-year tradition of free commerce between what is now called the Bronx and the island of Manhattan. The Bronx lawmakers have, by ignoring history and agreeing to the fee, voided the unwritten compact that came with the legal annexation of their communities, then called the "North Side," with New York City, then only Manhattan Island, beginning in 1874.

The concept of a separate entity called "the Bronx" began later, in 1898, with the consolidation of the greater city. At that time, charging a toll to go between the "North Side" and the rest of New York was as unthinkable as charging a levy to cross Fifth Avenue.

So if the speaker also caves in, what will really be accomplished is a "deconsolidation" of the city, separating forever the "outer" boroughs from "the city," and the tragedy is that it will all be for nothing.

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