

Free East River bridges should stay that way: Queens pols

Vin Barone, August 28, 2017



State Assemb. David Weprin speaks as Queens Borough President Melinda Katz, City Councilman Barry Grodenchik, second from right, and other officials take a stand against adding tolls to East River bridges during a news conference near the Queensboro Plaza subway station on Sunday, Aug. 27, 2017. (Credit: Vin Barone)

Transit

If Gov. Andrew Cuomo wants congestion pricing in New York, he had better not include tolling any of the city's free East River bridges, Queens elected officials warned Sunday morning.

The handful of elected officials from the state and city level have forcefully denounced the prospect of new bridge tolls as Cuomo drafts a congestion pricing plan for New York City that would raise revenue for its mass transit network.

"We're willing to listen to everything, but we will not accept tolls on the free East River bridges, which have been free since 1911," said Queens Assemb. David Weprin during a news conference near the Queensboro Plaza subway station. "Our Queens residents, and Brooklyn residents as well, rely on those bridges to go back and forth."

Cuomo is expected to unveil details on his congestion pricing plan at his 2018 State of the State address, according to the governor's office. While no specifics have emerged, the two prominent attempts in the past decade to institute congestion pricing in New York City both included tolling the East River's four well-traveled bridges: the Brooklyn, Manhattan, Williamsburg and Ed Koch Queensboro.

The elected officials who gathered together Sunday made clear that the idea wouldn't find support in Queens, citing a negative impact on commerce, the prospect of ever-increasing tolls and the belief that outer-borough residents should have the option to travel free of charge between boroughs.

"You should be able to travel, even if it's a little more burdensome, for free somehow from borough to borough," said Queens Borough President Melinda Katz, who questioned whether any new toll revenue would even make it to the Metropolitan Transportation Authority for specific infrastructure-related projects such as signal replacements.

"We talk about the MTA needing money and we talk about the fact that you have to upgrade the subways — which I don't think anyone would doubt," Katz said, "but the past [congestion pricing] proposals that have been given to us don't have any directed stream to the MTA for particular upgrades on the system."

The officials were joined by Queens Chamber of Commerce executive director Thomas Grech, who said he believed the city cannot have tolls on the East River bridges "until they can develop drones that can pick up people and products up over the air over the island of Manhattan."

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