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Why Downtown should back congestion pricing

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Dodging traffic as usual in Soho amid the Verrazano Bridge one-way-toll-aggravated Downtown congestion disaster. Villager file photo by Tequila Minsky

BY CHARLES KOMANOFF | Early last fall, Governor Cuomo’s “Fix NYC” task force chose my intricate Balanced Transportation Analyzer, or BTA, spreadsheet model as its analytical tool to figure out which vehicle tolls and surcharges could best fulfill the governor’s pledge to implement congestion pricing in New York City.

Congestion pricing — tolls to drive into the Manhattan Central Business District, or CBD, south of 60th St., and surcharges on for-hire vehicles (taxicabs, Ubers, etc.) operating within the Manhattan “taxi zone” — stands to benefit our city by thinning traffic in and near the CBD and generating revenues to improve subway service. No part of the city will benefit more than Lower Manhattan.

Three East River bridges connect Brooklyn with Downtown Manhattan, and a fourth connects Queens with Midtown. For nearly a century, the failure to toll these bridges has led drivers to pour onto our streets to reach destinations served by multiple subway lines or to pass through to New Jersey. My BTA model forecasts that the robust congestion charges outlined in the Fix NYC report will cut traffic volumes on those bridges by 25 percent. The reduction will reach 35 percent as subway improvements paid for by the tolls draw even more trips out of automobiles.

In plain numbers, the 25 percent reduction equates to 10,000 fewer trips in each direction each weekday on each East River bridge. Picture Canal, Broome, Delancey, Chambers, Walker and Varick Sts. and our other “traffic sewers” with thousands fewer cars and trucks. Imagine quieter neighborhoods, healthier air and safer streets for you and your children. Picture our buses not stuck in traffic and our subways not stuck between stations. Congestion pricing offers all this.

To be sure, someone has to pay the car and truck tolls and the taxicab and Uber surcharges, and that includes us Downtown residents. My model predicts that under any effective congestion pricing plan, residents of Manhattan will pay much more, over all, than residents of, say, Brooklyn or Queens. While we won’t pay to drive our cars out of the toll area, we will pay when we return across 60th St. or on an East River bridge. More importantly — since relatively few Lower Manhattan residents own cars — we’ll also pay surcharges to use taxis and Ubers and Lyfts within the taxi zone, which could extend up to 96th St. on the East Side and 110th St. on the West Side.

I believe that it’s only fair that Manhattan residents collectively pay the most in congestion charges. After all, we’ll reap the greatest benefits of reduced gridlock and healthier streets, so we ought to shoulder the greatest costs. Moreover, every vehicle trip that contributes to congestion, whether in a private car or a for-hire vehicle, should be charged equally for slowing down traffic.

And don’t forget political necessity: Former Mayor Mike Bloomberg’s attempt to enact congestion pricing a decade ago failed in large part because it tilted toward Manhattan; we must not make that mistake again.

Change is hard, especially when it goes after an entitlement — in this case, the “right” to tie up our streets without paying to do so. Typically, the minority enjoying an entitlement organize to defend it, while the majority who stand to benefit from a change stay silent or obsess over details. Witness state Assemblymember Yuh Line-Niou from Lower Manhattan insisting that policymakers “explore a [toll] carve-out for Lower Manhattan”; or West Side Assemblymember Richard Gottfried qualifying his “support [for] the concept [of congestion pricing]” by fretting that “many details still need to be worked out.”

Grumbling like that only makes it harder for congestion pricing’s champions — the Assembly speaker, the City Council speaker and the governor himself — to corral legislators from the other boroughs and the suburbs into voting majorities.

To pass congestion pricing — in a robust version that will truly decongest our streets and provide the financial wherewithal to revitalize mass transit — the communities that will benefit the most need to speak with a strong, clear voice. Every Manhattan community board, led by those representing Downtown and Midtown, should resoundingly endorse congestion pricing.

Komanoff is an energy-policy analyst, a transport economist and an environmental activist. In the 1990s, he co-founded the pedestrian-rights group Right of Way. He lives in Tribeca and has worked in Lower Manhattan since the 1960s.