DAILY NEWS

THE OP-ED PAGE

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The man who had a cure for gridlock

By CHARLES KOMANOFF

WILLIAM Vickrey must be spinning in his grave. The eminent economist, who died last month just days after winning the Nobel Prize, spent decades pleading with public officials to apply congestion pricing to gridlocked highways.

Alas, as the recent Queensboro Bridge fiasco indicates, his message remains unheeded.

For decades, communities on both sides of the bridge have suffered traffic hell. The city reconfigured the Manhattan approaches several weeks ago, but this merely shifted the gridlock. So the old patterns were restored, but with one change: Cars were given the Queensboro's bike lane throughout the evening rush, ironically disenfranchising the very bridge commuters — cyclists and walkers — who contribute least to congestion and pollution.

William Vickrey knew that peak pricing would untangle snarls

More traffic lanes won't solve gridlock at the Queensboro Bridge, or anywhere else. Instead, officials need to get wise to Prof. Vickrey's message: *Only congestion pricing can fix the paradox behind New York's chronic traffic congestion.*

What is the paradox? Car use benefits the driver but costs everyone else — including other drivers. A motorist entering a crowded bridge like the Queensboro causes delays not only to himself, but to a thousand motorists behind him; yet he pays only for his own lost time, leading him to drive even when the total delay-cost to society of his trip outweighs the gain to him.

The way out of this dilemma, as Vickrey saw 40 years ago, is simple: Toll all bridges and other congested roads, with the tolls varied according to traffic levels. If the peak tolls are set sufficiently high, enough motorists will choose different times, different routes and different modes — such as car-pooling or mass transit — to shrink congestion to manageable proportions.

Those who continue to drive at peak times will pay a premium. But they will be rewarded with a faster, more predictable trip. Everyone else, including those who opt out of driving at peak hours, will enjoy better transit — if the city invests the toll revenues in transportation improvements. And communities buckling under bumper-to-bumper traffic will get genuine relief.

Since Vickrey, who taught at Columbia, propounded the theory of peak (or congestion) pricing, it has been adopted in a host of industries. Off-peak long-distance phone calls get a two-thirds discount, and air travel, movies and electricity are priced according to demand. But two issues have blocked peak pricing on roads.

One is the specter of sprawling toll plazas spawning new gridlock. But that obstacle has been obviated by the advent of electronic toll collection. Notwithstanding the teething problems of the region's E-ZPass system, electronic tolling offers an efficient way to smooth travel peaks and valleys.

The other obstacle to bridge and road tolls here is the notion of the public's right to travel between Manhattan and the rest of the city for free. Leaving aside the glaring disconnect between free driving for motorists and the cost of transit for straphangers, the principle of free bridges must ring hollow to drivers stuck in traffic each morning and evening.

And what about the rights of pedestrians, cyclists, bus riders and neighborhood residents to a modicum of peace and quiet and safe passage on their streets?

Fifty years of building highways, adding lanes and computerizing traffic signals have left the city more gridlocked than ever. Traffic officers may help unsnarl traffic at selected spots, but they can't solve the problem of too many motorists wishing to drive in the same finite space at the same time. Only congestion pricing offers a way to match road usage to road capacity.

In the few brief days between winning the Nobel and his death from heart failure, Prof. Vickrey relished the opportunity to use the award as a bully pulpit to help solve real-world problems. New York City can honor his memory and help itself immeasurably by putting the professor's legacy to work on its roads and bridges.

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Traffic

DEMAND AND SUPPLY

IF WILLIAM VICKREY HAD LIVED LONG enough to collect his Nobel Prize in Stockholm this week, it's a good bet he would have used the occasion to chat up his big-city-traffic solutions. The Columbia University economist—who died of heart failure at 82 on October 11, three days after winning the Nobel—was renowned for telling anyone in earshot that economics could cure gridlock.

"What Vickrey recognized earlier than anyone else," recalled Sam Schwartz, a.k.a. *Daily News* columnist "Gridlock Sam" and head of Cooper Union's Infrastructure Institute, "is that a city's most valuable commodity is space." In the fifties, with the country in the thrall of highway-builder Robert Moses, Vickrey asserted that traffic would always outstrip highway capacity unless drivers paid full price for the space they occupied. Vickrey was no elitist, and it amused him that Americans ridiculed the bread lines that state subsidies produced in Moscow, yet demanded (and got) Soviet-style subsidies for the roads that resulted in all-American temper-fraying, time-consuming, air-polluting traffic jams.

What were Vickrey's brainstorms for getting traffic unglued? Start with midtown Manhattan, where double-parked delivery trucks slow traffic to a crawl. Merely reserving curbside space for deliveries doesn't work when trucks park in one spot for hours. The professor's answer: electronic parking tolls for commercial vehicles, charged to a smart card inside the windshield with a time display visible to a traffic officer. To provide an incentive to free up space for another truck, parking would be charged by the minute, with higher rates on the busiest streets and during peak hours. How high? Whatever it takes, Vickrey argued, to maintain 85 percent to 90 percent occupancy rates generating enough turnover so that truckers needing space and willing to pay could find it.

Nobel winner William Vickrey.

Variable tolls into Manhattan, with premium charges during rush hour, is one long-standing Vickrey proposal that technology has caught up with. New electronic toll-collection devices like E-Z Pass obviate the need for toll plazas. The next step is to vary tolls by time of day, perhaps with money-back guarantees on travel time. Sound fantastic? A new toll road in California's Orange County does just that, refunding the $2.50 toll when you don't save the twenty minutes promised by the program.

Will the public buy new tolls? Yes, insists Schwartz—citing polls showing majority support even in boroughs whose commuters would be most affected—if revenues go to prevent disasters like the 1988 Williamsburg Bridge closing. "Dedicate the money to transit upgrades and bridge maintenance, and New Yorkers will see bridge tolls not as a penalty but as a means to a quality trip," says Schwartz.

The Thruway Authority and the MTA are now set to study time-variable tolls on nine bridges and tunnels, including the Tappan Zee, Triborough, and Verrazano-Narrows. But the normally voluble city transportation commissioner, Christopher Lynn, is mum about the free East (and Harlem) River bridges that bring in more cars than our streets can handle.

Similarly, Lynn touts electronic parking meters that will debut "soon" but tells *New York* he has no plans to toll curbside space at the levels Vickrey estimated were needed to untangle midtown congestion.

A native of Victoria, British Columbia, Vickrey spent his adult life in this region and may have understood its traffic patterns better than anyone. Maybe someday we'll take to heart his observation that driver behavior—like so many other forms of social intercourse—is subject to the laws of economics. CHARLES KOMANOFF

GOTHAM