



Testimony to the New York City Traffic Mitigation Commission

Public Hearing at Hofstra University

October 24, 2007

by

Christopher Jones, Vice President for Research

Good evening. My name is Christopher Jones and I'm Vice President for Research for Regional Plan Association, a private, nonprofit research and planning organization serving Long Island, New York City and the greater metropolitan region. We appreciate this opportunity to testify on how the proposed congestion pricing pilot program would benefit Long Island, as well as the questions that we would ask the Commission to address.

Before addressing the specific merits of the pilot program, I would like to make two larger points. One is that, although this program was introduced by the Mayor of New York City, it is very much a regional initiative with direct implications for Long Island and other parts of the metropolitan area. Even if you never travel into Manhattan, we all breathe the polluted air that travels across municipal, county and state boundaries. We all rely on the region's transportation system to support job and economic growth throughout the region. And we all need to be concerned about the climate change impacts of having too many cars on the road.

The second point is that, regardless of where you stand on congestion pricing, the debate that has been generated by the proposal has helped focus attention on the problem of traffic congestion. In fact, both supporters and opponents of congestion charging are largely in agreement that something can and must be done. Anyone who drives on or lives near any major bridge or highway knows that traffic has gone from being a nuisance to being a crisis, and if we don't do something now, it's only going to get a lot worse. There is a growing consensus that the risks to our public health are too high, and the costs to our economy are too great.

So the question is not whether we should do anything about congestion, but what we should do about it. The questions that I'd like to focus on today is

how the proposed pilot program would benefit Long Island and how the costs are distributed.

First, by reducing auto and truck traffic, not only in Manhattan but throughout the region, the congestion pricing pilot will both improve public health and help keep Long Island's economy competitive. And with a growing number of cities successfully implementing congestion pricing, including London, Stockholm and Singapore, the pilot program will help us keep pace with regions around the world that have reduced congestion by as much as 40%.

Second, Long Island would also benefit directly from revenues that will be generated from congestion pricing. Projects that are targeted for increased funding include the East Side Access project, which would save 75,000 Long Island Rail Road riders up to 44 minutes per day (22 minutes in each direction), transit for the Nassau Hub, and a third track for the Long Island Rail Road that would greatly increase the railroad's capacity for travel within Nassau and Suffolk, as well as to and from Manhattan. Without congestions pricing, it is difficult to see where the revenue would come from to complete all of these important projects as well as keep the LIRR and subway system in a state of good repair. None of the alternatives that have been proposed for congestion pricing, such as improved traffic enforcement or increased parking fees, would produce nearly the amount of revenue as the pilot program.

But of course, the question of who pays is critical, and it is important that the program be fair as well as effective. In this regard, it is important to note several important facts about who on Long Island would pay the fee.

First, only 3.4% of Long Islander workers commute to Manhattan by car, with more than twice that number commuting by bus or the Long Island Rail Road. Drivers are much more likely to earn higher incomes, with only 1.6% of drivers in households earning less than \$30,000 commuting to Manhattan by car, compared with over 4% in households earning more than \$100,000.

Second, because bridge and tunnel tolls could be deducted from the \$8 charge, even most of those who drive to Manhattan would pay no more than they do already. Of the 33,000 Long Islanders who drive into Manhattan to go to work, only an estimated 11,000 would pay an additional charge.

And what will happen without congestion pricing? There will be even greater pressure to raise tolls on bridges and tunnels, like the Triborough Bridge and the Midtown Tunnel, to make up for the serious revenue shortfalls faced by the MTA, further exacerbating the inequities between those who now pay to drive into Manhattan and those who do not.

There are certainly many questions that the Commission needs to ask. Are there hardship cases for medical or other reasons that should be exempt from the charge? Are there ways to make the system more efficient by adjusting the boundaries or making other changes? Are additional

parking facilities at train stations needed? Certainly, a system of monitoring the pilot needs to be specified so that the program can be fine-tuned once it is up and running.

However, these legitimate questions about implementation should not deflect from the need to enact a pilot program and finally begin to seriously address the problem of traffic congestion.
