

THE HONORABLE MICHAEL R. BLOOMBERG
MAYOR OF NEW YORK CITY

REMARKS

REGIONAL PLAN ASSOCIATION'S
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"THE TIME FOR ACTION IS NOW"

[Mayor Bloomberg is introduced by the Assembly Chairman, Theodore Roosevelt IV, Chairman, Lehman Brothers' Global Council on Climate Change.]

Thank you, Teddy, for those very kind words.

When a "Roosevelt" says you're on the right track concerning the environment, what more praise do you need?

Now, I've had the distinction of belonging to both political parties. So I can honestly say just how much I admire Republicans named Teddy—as well as Democrats named Eleanor and Franklin.

And I admit I've also got a soft spot in my heart for another Roosevelt: Teddy's daughter Alice. Because it was Alice who said to a guest at a dinner party: "If you can't say something good about someone... then just sit right here by me." Political affiliations may change, but good advice like that never goes out of style.

Well, thankfully, I've got lots of good things to say about the RPA, and especially about your focus on creating "A Bright Green Future" for our fast-growing metropolitan area. And today, I want to talk about the heart of this region:

Our magnificent city—which has endured so much, and which has come so far. These are truly remarkable, hopeful times for New York. It seems that each day, our city—whose future seemed doubtful to many people not so long ago—passes another major milestone.

We've reduced crime and unemployment to all-time lows... and brought our bond rating to an all-time high. Student test scores and graduation rates are steadily rising. For the first time in more than 60 years, New Yorkers are, on average, living longer than people in the rest of the United States. And perhaps most remarkably, there are more New Yorkers today than at any time in our history:

8.2 million people. Our population is expected to continue to soar, and reach nine million people by the year 2030.

Nearly one million more New Yorkers—along with millions more visitors each year—will add to our already dazzling vibrancy and diversity. We can also expect up to three-quarters of a million new jobs in our city, and tremendous economic opportunity across our entire region—

But only if we act wisely now.

We've got to begin to manage the growth that we can see coming. Because if we don't act now, that growth will be paralyzing—straining our infrastructure and endangering an already embattled environment.

We could face parks bursting at the seams... air and water dirtier and more polluted... and streets and highways jammed with ever-more traffic—a subject I want to come back to in some detail shortly.

Creating a “Bright Green Future” for our city, and our region, is going to demand the kind of long-term solutions that RPA has pioneered since its founding back in 1929.

Well, some two and a half years remain in our Administration. And we have no intention of just watching the sands fall through the hourglass of our second term. We're not going to allow the obstacles we can see looming in our future to become rooted into place.

That's not what leadership is about.

No, instead we're using the next 972 days to put New York on course to becoming the nation's first truly sustainable 21st century city. To guide us, we launched “PLAN-Y-C”—our process for shaping New York's growth between now and 2030.

To develop PLAN-Y-C, we established the city's office of Long-Term Planning and Sustainability, and named as its director someone that some of you heard from in a workshop earlier today...

... And someone I'm confident that all New Yorkers will be hearing a lot from for many years to come: Rit Aggarwala.

We also named a Sustainability Advisory Board of leaders from the private sector... from organized labor... from academia... from environmental organizations, and also grassroots community groups. And of course from the RPA, too—and I want to thank Bob Yaro for all his hard work.

A blueprint—or should I say “greenprint?”—for building a “Greener, Greater New York.” There are 127 detailed initiatives in this report—far more that I can even begin to summarize today.

So let me simply say that PLAN-Y-C speaks directly to the major elements of RPA’s agenda:

- Promoting transit-oriented housing development;
- Preserving and enhancing the open spaces that not only protect our watersheds but that also enrich our lives;
- Encouraging energy conservation and the development of green power;
- And dramatically reducing the greenhouse gases that contribute to the global warming that threatens our region with rising sea levels and intensifying coastal storms.

In researching Plan-Y-C, we found that New York is in many ways already a “Green Apple”—a model of energy efficiency and environmentally sound design. But we also recognized that there’s lots of room for improvement. We also saw clearly that the time for planning is over, and the time for action is now. And that’s especially true when it comes to transportation.

Over the years, RPA has played a leading role in shaping our city’s great transportation system.

And we’re very confident that one of RPA’s directors, Janette Sadik-Khan will continue that proud tradition as our City’s new Transportation Commissioner.

From building the Erie Canal, to constructing our subway system, key transportation projects have fueled New York’s phenomenal growth. But there have also been some less inspiring moments in our history, too.

Exhibit A is the Second Avenue Subway—a project that sometimes seems to have had more stops and starts than the Number 6 local in the Bronx. The photo behind me shows Governor Rockefeller, Mayor Lindsay, and others breaking ground on the Second Avenue Subway in 1972.

Rit—as you can see, ties were a lot wider back in those days. And so were sideburns.

The story of the Second Avenue Subway is familiar to most of us here today: How the deep fiscal crisis of the 70s put it in limbo.....And how, even after RPA Director Dick Ravitch and others heroically rescued the MTA, the focus was—necessarily—on maintaining what we had, rather than on expanding it.

Now, it was certainly good news last month when work resumed on this project. No question about it, it's better to be building than not building. But the photo behind me is evidence that, like the road to heaven, the subway tunnel beneath Second Avenue could still wind up being paved with good intentions—and not much more.

The reason that this project ground to a halt 35 years ago is that there was no dedicated source of revenue to see it through to completion.

And do you know what? There still isn't, even today.

Funding for Phase One of this project—the leg running from 96th south to 63rd Street—is still almost \$1 billion short. That's real money. And how are going to pay for Phase Two—just to get it up to 125th Street, with a current price tag of \$1.7 billion? No one knows.

And let me point out that the Second Avenue Subway isn't the only transit project with this kind of sad history—not by a long shot.

How many people know, for example, that the Number 7 line, which now ends at Main Street in Flushing, was originally supposed to run all the way to Bayside and Whitestone? Or that there have been plans to run a subway line to Southeast Queens since Moses was a little boy—and I don't mean Robert Moses, I mean Moses Moses!

And let's not leave Brooklyn out of the story: Did you know that the Number 2 subway that today ends at Flatbush Avenue was actually supposed to keep going all the way to Marine Park?

Time and again, politicians have been willing to put these and other important projects on the chopping block, sighing that we “just can't afford them.”

Well, as part of PLAN-Y-C, we've developed a solution for making sure the vital projects we need actually do get built. Because we just can't afford not to build them— not with the population of our city, and our region rising so rapidly... and not with our transportation system already strained to the breaking point.

No, the time for delay is over—and the time for action is now.

Because here are the facts:

- Of the nation's 25 metropolitan-area counties with the worst commuting times, we have the dubious distinction of having 13 of them in or around New York City. And the longest are these four: Queens, Staten Island, the Bronx, and Brooklyn.

- And in our city, 11 of our 26 subway routes already experience peak-period congestion, and three of them are at capacity – the routes in red. (I've been in that red a few times myself.)

The full price tag of this region-wide congestion—in wasted fuel, lost business revenue, increased operating costs, and decreased productivity—comes to some \$13 billion—annually.

So conditions are bad enough now. But if we don't act – by 2030, the situation will be intolerable. You just have to look at all the red on this chart. By 2030, we expect that nearly every subway route – 23 of 26 – will be heavily congested. Our highways will be clogged as well.

The bottom line: Morning and evening rush hours may well consume half of each working day. Business deliveries will grind to a halt. Short-term—until new and tougher standards go into effect—automobile exhaust—which today accounts for more than 50% of air pollution—will get even worse.

Just think of the damage to our economy... our environment... and our health.

New Yorkers already breathe sootier air than the residents of all but one other major American city—and earlier this week, the American Lung Association delivered the somber news that our air quality is actually getting worse. Children in the South Bronx and other communities already are hospitalized for asthma at four times the national rate. This is a slow-motion public health and environmental disaster. And in the face of it, how, in good conscience, can anyone maintain that doing nothing is an option?

No, the time for denial is over, and the time for action is now.

As part of PLAN-Y-C, we took a comprehensive look at the challenge of keeping New York moving forward. We came up a broad range of initiatives. They range from dramatically expanding ferry service... to completing our 1,800-mile bike master plan...to implementing smarter, more effective traffic management and enforcement, by, for example, putting more enforcement agents on the streets, and by increasing our use of red-light cameras.

At the heart of our transportation plan is a proposed three-year pilot program to reduce traffic on the streets of Manhattan below 86th Street through congestion pricing.

RPA has long advocated just such an experiment with congestion pricing—and in preparing our own proposal, we took a close look at your trailblazing 2003 report on this issue, as well as at the congestion pricing experiences of Stockholm, Singapore, and London.

We concluded that congestion pricing would reduce auto traffic south of 86th Street by more than 6%, and auto speeds would be increased by about 7%.

That may not sound like a lot—but a 7% increase in travel speeds would make every day feel like one of those mid-summer days when the traffic really flows because so many people are on vacation.

Now, over the past two weeks, we've all heard the concerns about whether everyone is being treated fairly by this plan. So let me devote one New York minute—okay, make that two—to giving you five reasons why congestion pricing will benefit people in all five boroughs and throughout the entire region.

First: Congestion pricing will equalize, not add to, costs for many commuters.

Whether you drive, for example, from 96th Street in Manhattan or 96th Street in Flushing, you'll pay the same charge.

Second: Today, residential streets in the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Queens are clogged by drivers who are going out of their way to avoid tolls.

Congestion pricing will end that. And with charges at all entry points equalized, there will be less temptation to turn the Williamsburg Bridge—for example—into the permanent parking lot it now regularly becomes.

Third: As Crain's New York Business reported earlier this week, contractors and commercial drivers now lose hours each day sitting in gridlocked Manhattan traffic.

Congestion pricing will increase their productivity—and their profits.

Fourth: Today, cars and trucks on their way into Manhattan clog Flatbush Avenue in Downtown Brooklyn and Queens Boulevard in Long Island City, making up nearly half the traffic on those two major streets.

Congestion pricing will stop that. It will sharply cut into such traffic during peak hours—good news for everyone who travels, works, shops, and breathes in those fast-growing business districts.

Fifth and finally: Today, too many communities don't have the mass transit options they need.

Congestion pricing will improve that—because as part of our plan, we've already identified 22 neighborhoods with the highest concentrations of drivers going to Manhattan. And we've already come up with ways to improve transit service in those communities—not by 2030, but during the next year or two.

And improving mass transit is an area where the time for simplistic sound bites is over... and the time for action is now.

The fact is that congestion pricing will not only produce cleaner air... and a stronger economy... but also continue to underwrite essential transit improvements for decades to come.

Take a look at this roster of 18 regional transportation projects. They include bus rapid transit, the new Moynihan Station, the Lower Manhattan Rail Link, and many others. All 18 of the projects on this list are essential to our region's future. There's just one problem: Collectively, there's a \$31 billion gap between the funds now available to build them, and what finishing them will eventually cost. Sound familiar? Sound like the Second Avenue Subway?

Is it going to be “déjà vu all over again?”

Well, not if we fill that gap—and finish these projects—with revenue bonds underwritten by our proposed Sustainable Mobility and Regional Transportation (SMART) financing authority. SMART funds will come from three sources:

First, a commitment—which we made a down-payment on in the budget we released last week—from the City to contribute \$220 million a year.

Second, a matching amount from New York State—reflecting that transportation needs are regional, and funding sources must also be regional.

And third, congestion pricing revenues.

With SMART funds, we can expand rapid bus service to areas of the city – particularly in Queens – that are poorly served by the subway. We can build a rail link to connect Lower Manhattan with Brooklyn, Jamaica, JFK, and Long Island, where a light rail system could help many city residents and Long Islanders get to work more easily. And, yes, we can build the Second Avenue Subway – not just from 96th Street to 63rd St, but all the way from Harlem to the Battery, and make it, as the RPA has proposed, truly part of an inter-borough transit system.

Do all that, and more, and you can see the results on this chart, as red turns to green—the sign of a healthy and growing city, once again on the move.

And that's just the beginning.

Because with the billions of surplus dollars generated by SMART financing, we can continue building a true 21st century transit system for decades to come, a system that includes improved access to the region's airports, high-speed inter-city rail service, and other visionary projects, including perhaps some of those long-abandoned subway extensions.

Now before concluding my remarks, I want to offer a brief update on the reception that our congestion pricing proposal has received. Because for an idea that was supposedly “dead on arrival,” it has shown quite a lot of life.

Last week, when Deputy Mayor Dan Doctoroff discussed congestion pricing with 300 business leaders on Staten Island, he received a standing ovation. Organized labor and business leaders, think tanks from the left and the right, tree-huggers and real estate developers, people who in the past haven’t been able to agree on the time of day, now agree that it’s time to try congestion pricing.

And that new spirit of unity encompasses a lot of us here today, too, who haven’t always seen eye-to-eye on every issue.

Our proposal has also received broad support from newspaper editorial pages and opinion leaders. It’s gotten an enthusiastic thumbs-up from Federal Transportation Secretary Mary Peters, and we think that makes our pilot program an excellent candidate for Federal funding.

And yes, I would say that congestion pricing is also getting a fair reception in Albany. We’re having a good dialogue with our legislative leaders—one that I hope you’ll encourage, both as individuals, and as members of this great organization.

We’re prepared to continue that dialogue—so long as it’s a principled discussion. And a principled discussion has to recognize the wisdom of what the late Senator Moynihan said: “You’re entitled to your own opinion, but not to your own facts.”

There are certain facts that we’ve just all got to face up to—facts about congestion’s impact on our environment, our economy, our health, and our future—on our lives, and the lives of our children. Facts about how we’re going to pay for the transportation projects we need to keep our region from choking on its growth in the decades to come.

We’re ready to have a reality-based dialogue with anyone about any element of our transportation plan, including congestion pricing. We’ll talk about the boundaries of the congestion pricing zone, the fees that might be charged, the hours they would be applicable, and the methodology for administering the program.

But what we won’t do—what we can’t do—is postpone essential decisions any longer. We won’t ignore—if you’ll excuse the expression—the “inconvenient truths” of the difficult challenges we face.

No, the time for that is finally over—and the time for action is clearly now.

Because it's action that will give our children "the Bright Green Future" that they deserve.

Thank you once again, and God bless you all. ###