

• 4/13/08

# Fare-Free Transit: An Immodest Proposal

How to win congestion pricing? Start with free mass transit.

Charles Komanoff

Mayor Bloomberg's scheme to charge \$8 to drive a car into Manhattan has been deep-sixed by legislators who derided the plan as "class warfare" and "elitist." What is to be done? Here's the short answer: Demand a \$16 charge. Expand the tolling hours from 12 hours a day, 5 days a week, to 24/7, thereby quadrupling the overall take from drivers. Oh, and make transit free.

That, in a nutshell, is the "Kheel Plan for Balancing Free Transit and Congestion Pricing in New York City." Charge sixteen bucks to

drive into the Manhattan central business district (CBD) and use the proceeds to zero out subway and bus fares.

Audacious? Yes. Impossible? Not at all.

To see why this bolder plan can succeed where the mayor's plan failed, it helps to understand why legislators balked. That requires looking past the standard story line of Albany dysfunction and the "windshield perspective" infecting media and legislature alike, and subjecting the benefits of the mayor's plan to close scrutiny. These included a 7 percent drop in traffic within the CBD and 2 percent citywide; a 2 percent drop in climate-damaging emissions; and half a billion dollars a year in net revenue for transit improvements.

What's wrong with this list? It's a bit underwhelming. Picture a Sicilian family weighing whether to pull up stakes and emigrate to America in the 1890s. A 2 percent rise in wages wouldn't have tipped the balance. The same applies to Bloomberg's plan.

Something as radical as charging people for the public space their cars occupy—the horror!—requires a very substantial inducement. Without it, not even a widely respected mayor, backed by a coalition of business, labor, and "green" groups, could generate enough public enthusiasm to force the rusty machinery of Albany into action.

Ted Kheel understood this equation. Kheel, the veteran labor mediator and transit advocate, commissioned a study of free transit combined with a steep congestion fee and other charges on motor vehicles. I headed the research effort for that study, which was released in January 2008. The array of benefits we found for Kheel's combination of carrots and sticks startled even us.

Kheel's plan would cut traffic by 25 percent within the Manhattan core, and 9 percent citywide (four times the reductions in Bloomberg's plan). Ridership would increase, yet transit would be less crowded, since some current subway riders would shift to biking (helped by less traffic) and bus and commuter rail routes (made free and faster). The drop in traffic would save over a hundred million "vehicle hours" a year that are now wasted in gridlock and liberate new public space in the heart of the city (from lanes cleared by the traffic reduction). We would pull in annual revenue of almost half a billion dollars to upgrade and expand transit, while reaping environmental and health benefits from decreased driving and increased walking and cycling.

Now that's a payday worth crossing an ocean for. But won't opposition to a twice-higher toll be twice worse? Certainly not. Opponents are infuriated by the idea of any charge at all. Doubling the fee may tip some marginal waverers into the opposition camp, but very few. Much more importantly, the Kheel Plan will evoke deeper and broader political support. This time around, the car-driving cadre will have to argue with millions of straphanging New Yorkers, rather than just a few wonks in love with a sound but politically unsexy idea.

Consider an exchange I had with a Brooklyn state legislator at a recent bicycle ride. The legislator, a congestion pricing opponent, remarked on the need for bicycle lanes. When I told him congestion pricing could clear space for new lanes, he held up his hand as if to say, "Don't go there." But when I hinted that he might not want to walk away from a plan that would let his constituents ride trains and buses for free, his double-take was instant: "What's this Kheel Plan, and how exactly is it going to work?"

We intend to spend the next 18 months letting our fellow New Yorkers know exactly how the Kheel Plan will work, and reflecting their suggestions in an even more compelling version of the plan we published in January. We're betting they'll find it irresistible.

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WTC Hub Grounded?

The \$2.2 billion transportation center at Ground Zero, with a soaring canopy designed by Santiago Calatrava, will reportedly bust its budget by nearly \$1 billion. Port Authority officials suggest the project could be scaled back.

Charles Komanoff, an economist, is a past president of Transportation Alternatives and a founding trustee of the Tri-State Transportation Campaign. The Kheel Report can be downloaded at [www.kheelplan.org](http://www.kheelplan.org).