

Statement of Theodore W. Kheel

The MTA, like the rest of the country, is broke. The good news is: we now have an opportunity to create a sustainable transportation system for the future.

The Ravitch Commission has a plan to fund mass transit. The best, and worst, thing to be said about that plan is that it changes as little as possible — particularly when it comes to cars and drivers. The Ravitch plan will reduce car congestion in Manhattan by barely 3%, and the vast majority of the funds he proposes to raise come from new taxes — in a state and region already rather heavily taxed.

The Ravitch Commission has forgotten that it is the car that destroyed our mass transit system in the first place, and it is the car that is crippling our city's economy and its ability to subsidize our ailing transit system now.

I have said this before, but I am here to say it again. It was the rise of the automobile as a means of transportation into the city that caused the downfall of mass transit. It happened in the fifties and sixties, when new highways and bridges swelled the coffers of the authorities that collected tolls while draining customers from transit, until every suburban railroad in the New York metropolitan area was “either bankrupt or teetering on the brink.”¹

It was the automobile that did this.

Last Sunday, the New York Times reported glowingly that transit ridership has increased over the last few years, while car traffic has stabilized.

What the Times failed to note is that transit ridership is still nowhere near the levels of the 1940s, before that massive highway construction began. The peak year for subway use in New York remains 1946, with ridership of 2 billion. This year it barely reached 1.6 billion.

Why? Because in the interim, massive numbers of commuters turned to cars.

Not only does the automobile divert riders from mass transit, it drains our economy. The Partnership for New York put out a report two years ago² that the Ravitch Commission

¹ Robert A. Caro, “The Power Broker,” Vintage Books (1974).

² “Growth or Gridlock: The Economic Case for Traffic Relief and Transit Improvement for a Greater New York,” Dec. 2006, [http://www.pfnyc.org/publications/Growth or Gridlock.pdf](http://www.pfnyc.org/publications/Growth%20or%20Gridlock.pdf).

appears to have forgotten, if they ever read it. The Partnership found that the costs of congestion to our city include two billion dollars in lost business revenue, six billion dollars in lost time and productivity, two billion in wasted fuel and operating costs, three to four billion dollars in lost regional output, and up to 50,000 lost jobs.

Can a city that labors under such a handicap support additional taxes to pay for the transit system that this same traffic is undermining?

Mr. Ravitch was charged with raising funds for mass transit. His plan does that, in the short term, but in a way that undermines our transportation system by almost entirely ignoring the automobile and the congestion it causes.

He took this route, I believe, because he thought it politically expedient, after the defeat of the Mayor's congestion pricing proposal.

I am not seeking to re-introduce Mayor Bloomberg's proposal, which had serious flaws — not least of them, its disproportionate burden on what people in Manhattan call, disrespectfully, the "outer" boroughs. I agree with Dick Ravitch that that plan is dead — deservedly dead, I would add. Instead, I have proposed a plan that has two parts. Part One offers free transit for most of the day and drastically reduces mass transit fares in other cases, as a way to entice motorists out of their cars and reward New Yorkers who already take transit. Part Two raises tolls on car traffic — the only reasonable way, I believe to reduce the traffic congestion that is choking our city.

My plan gives workers a choice to spend literally nothing on transportation in these hard times. It provides an enormous economic benefit to a large class of New Yorkers and still raises the money needed to fund the MTA's operating costs, while helping our city's economy in dozens of indirect ways by reducing congestion.

For more than half a century I have said that we need a balanced transportation system for our city. This moment of crisis affords an extraordinary opportunity for us to rethink what we are doing, change our ways, and achieve a sustainable system. It's time.