

Decision on congestion pricing expected shortly



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A plan to charge motorists for driving into the most congested parts of Manhattan is one step closer to reality as the state's leaders last week introduced legislation that would allow New York City to move ahead with the controversial plan.

Gov. David A. Paterson submitted a congestion-pricing bill March 21 that follows the recommendations of the New York City Traffic Mitigation Commission. If the bill passes, New York would be eligible to receive \$354 million in federal funds to enact a congestion-pricing plan. The federal government has imposed a deadline of April 7 for New York to be eligible for the federal funds.

By last Friday, the bill (S.7243/A.10406) had been introduced in the Senate by Majority Leader Joseph L. Bruno, R,C,I-Brunswick, who also serves as chairman of the Senate Rules Committee. In the Assembly, Speaker Sheldon Silver, D,WF-Manhattan, who chairs the Rules Committee in his house, is the bill sponsor. The Senate bill has been referred to the Transportation Committee, and the Assembly bill has been referred to the Ways and Means Committee.



Congestion pricing, one of 16 transportation initiatives outlined in New York City Mayor Bloomberg's PlaNYC2030, would charge passenger cars \$8 to drive into what is considered New York City's most congested area, below 60th Street in Manhattan, Monday through Friday, from 6 a.m. until 6 p.m. Commercial trucks would be charged \$21.

The mayor reacted last Friday to the introduction of legislation in the Assembly. "With legislation now before both the Assembly and the Senate, we are closer than we've ever been to securing \$354 million in federal funds for immediate use in transit improvements," Bloomberg said. He said the next step would be to work out "unresolved issues that have been raised, including mitigating the impact on lower-income drivers."

The plan has seen opposition from those who fear it would lead to increased congestion and parking problems for residents north of 60th Street in Manhattan and in the outer boroughs. Those opposed have also argued congestion pricing would amount to an unfair fee for both people living on low incomes and small businesses that travel into the city to provide goods and services.

Of the \$354 million that the federal government promised New York, \$10 million would go toward implementation of the plan, including the purchase of necessary equipment. New York City would then lay out another \$110 million for implementation, according to John Gallagher, spokesman for Bloomberg, who added that the plan is expected to realize \$500 million in added revenue.

"Congestion pricing addresses two urgent concerns ... the need to reduce congestion on our streets and roads ... and the need to raise significant revenue for mass transit improvements," Paterson said.

The New York City Council, which must approve a plan before the Assembly or Senate can act upon it, is expected to vote on it sometime this week.

City Council Speaker Christine C. Quinn said traffic congestion is costing New Yorkers billions of dollars a year, in addition to the damage that is being done to the environment. She said the enactment of a congestion-pricing plan could effectively reduce gridlock, as well as add a new source of revenue for all five boroughs of New York City.

"Sen. Bruno and his conference are once again demonstrating their commitment to the people of this city and state by introducing Gov. Paterson's program bill that will allow us to implement congestion pricing," Bloomberg said, "a plan that an overwhelming majority of New Yorkers support when the money is tied to improving mass transit."

Results of a Quinnipiac poll released early last week showed voters favor the congestion-pricing plan by a measure of about 2 to 1. However, 51 percent of those polled indicated they do not believe that money from the plan would go to

mass transit.

The Senate Republicans are hopeful a congestion-pricing plan will be enacted.

"We're optimistic," Bruno spokesman Scott Reif said. "Our position hasn't changed; we remain supportive of a plan to reduce traffic congestion and improve air quality."

Dan Weiller, press representative for Silver, said that although an Assembly bill has been introduced, there must be a vote in City Council before further action can be taken. If it does not pass the City Council, then the debate in Albany becomes a moot point.

WE ACT for Environmental Justice, an advocacy group, along with the Earth Institute of Columbia University, released a study late last week evaluating concerns of community members and elected officials about the impact on parking in Manhattan, congestion and quality of life.

Cecil Corbin-Mark, WE ACT deputy director, and Stephanie Tyree, WE ACT sustainability policy coordinator, discussed the report last week and were joined by Sen. Bill Perkins, D-Harlem, and Assemblymen Adriano Espaillat, D,WF-Manhattan, and Adam Clayton Powell IV, D-East Harlem.

While members of WE ACT said they support the congestion-pricing plans, they say there are concerns that must be addressed, among them added revenue being used for increased bus service in New York City. WE ACT said the group began the study after the traffic mitigation commission, established by state law in July, 2007 to review plans and submit suggestions to reduce traffic congestion and health and safety issues within the city of New York, announced their recommendations on Jan. 31.

In the report, it was reported that New York City residents are generally not concerned about a "park and ride" problem, whereby commuters would park their car outside of the congestion zone and take mass transit downtown. In addition, any increase in parking outside of the congestion zone would be offset by a reduction in traffic induced by congestion pricing, according to the report.

"You can't automatically assume that a good idea becomes a good enacted bill," Perkins said.

Perkins, who is asthmatic, said the environmental and health concerns that a congestion-pricing bill would address are very important.

All three lawmakers in attendance agreed that while a congestion-pricing bill is necessary, it must be an effective bill that addresses all concerns.

Powell said the idea that the pricing plan will hurt low- or middle-class people is "nonsense."

"To do nothing is not an option, and it would be irresponsible not to do anything," Powell said. He also said if a bill is not passed, it would only lead to fare and toll hikes.

A spokesman for Sen. Tom Libous, R,C,I- Binghamton, chair of the Transportation Committee, said last Friday the senator is busy working on the budget and would not be able to comment on the congestion pricing plan.

A spokesman for Assemblyman Herman D. Farrell Jr., D-Manhattan, chair of the Ways and Means Committee, said last Friday the assemblyman was also busy working on the budget and was not available for comment.

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