

# The Best Things in Life are Free So Why Not Public Transit in NYC?

“If you were to design the ultimate system, you would have mass transit be free and charge an enormous amount for cars.”

-Mayor Michael Bloomberg, April 2007

FOR MANY YEARS TRANSIT ADVOCATES have called for affordable public transit fares. The MTA took a big step in that direction beginning ten years ago, when it introduced unlimited ride passes and free transfers between buses and subways. Ridership soared because of these pricing innovations.

Price really does matter; it strongly affects travel behavior, whether on transit or in cars.

Mayor Bloomberg's plan for congestion pricing to reduce car use in the Manhattan Central Business District (CBD) is a critical step in improving the walking and cycling environment in the crowded core of our city. But to be fully successful, road pricing must be accompanied by a strategy to lower the price for transit use.

Just how low can it go? Well, all the way to zero is a possibility.

Thanks to a generous grant from Nurturing New York's Nature, a foundation headed by NYC's storied labor negotiator, Theodore Kheel, the Institute for Rational Urban Mobility, Inc. (IRUM) has initiated a study of free or reduced-fare transit combined with Manhattan CBD Cordon Tolls. Cordon pricing has been very successful in Central London, where traffic volumes have been decreased by 17% and congestion has been reduced by 30%.

Preliminary findings of the "Price Matters" study suggest that if Manhattan CBD Cordon Tolls were set at the current London level -- \$16 per entry -- and were applied at all times of the day, weekdays and weekends, some \$3.1 billion in revenues would be generated, fully offsetting MTA bus and subway revenues, and leaving a \$283 million per year surplus. Added to this would be sav-

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The Staten Island Ferry is already free. An ongoing study proposes free buses and subways for all New Yorkers.

ings resulting from not collecting fares on the subway, some \$360 million per year. Further cost savings occur by eliminating fare collection on buses, which reduces boarding time and improves productivity. These gains would be offset by the added cost of operating more bus and rail service to accommodate increased ridership.

The news media focuses its discussion on one facet of congestion pricing -- reducing the number of vehicles that interfere with each other at busy times and speeding up the remaining vehicles in the traffic stream. But even more important than making life easier for motorists is the gain for the two million residents, visitors and workers who each day must deal with the painful negatives that result from too many motor vehicles in the CBD. And many of these ills persist after rush hours - noise and air pollution, and injuries and deaths resulting from motor vehicular traffic occur at all hours of the day and night.

For free transit to work, it is clear that transit capacity must be quickly expanded to accommodate the diverted motorists and new riders generated by congestion pricing and free public transit. Fortunately, the subway and commuter rail system have the track capacity to handle much higher loads. In the morning peak hour, where ridership is great-

est, only 51.5% of the capacity on the twenty inbound rail tracks leading to the CBD is utilized. For most lines, overcrowding is the result of management decisions to contain operating cost, not because of system limitations. More trains could be placed into service over the next several years if the 1,500 subway and commuter rail cars now slated for retirement were kept in service, as new cars now being manufactured arrive. Operating cost would increase, but only modestly since the bulk of cost is to maintain the fixed plant, including tracks, signals and stations.

Several subway lines, including the Lexington and Queens Boulevard express lines, are operating at track capacity, and so our study will assess the ability of commuter rail lines serving the Bronx and Queens to draw overloads from these subways lines.

A few years ago, congestion pricing in NYC existed only as a fantasy. Things change. We're finally in the midst a long overdue debate on the transportation system our city deserves. Let's make free transit part of that discussion.

Preliminary results of the Price Matters study are posted at [www.irum.org](http://www.irum.org). □

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