Committee to Keep NYC Congestion Tax Free

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CONGESTION TAX: MUST BE A BETTER WAY

Concerned elected officials and Community Leaders convened today (Wednesday, June 20, 2007) at the foot of the Manhattan pedestrian ramp of the Brooklyn Bridge to question claimed deadlines and funding available if the State Legislature were to adopt City Hall's proposed Congestion Tax. Walter McCaffrey of Keep NYC Congestion Tax Free, City Council Member David Weprin, chair of the Finance Committee, and members of Keep NYC Congestion Tax Free's coalition, including leaders from the Queens Civic Congress, find the absence of real deadlines and funding obviate any need for any action by the State Legislature other than to reject further consideration of City Hall's proposal to charge New Yorkers $8 ($21 for truckers) to drive into Manhattan below 86th Street.

"Recent disclosures demonstrate the federal deadline for funding is anything but firm and clearly malleable (1)," stated Walter McCaffrey of Keep NYC Congestion Tax Free.

"Similar disclosures raise clear questions whether Congress authorized any allocations promised by the US DOT Secretary," stated Council Finance Chair David Weprin. "At best any funds that may become available, even if pre-approved, depend not on agency but Congressional actions. (2) Thus the City Congestion Tax scheme cannot rely on any promises of federal money because Congress had yet to authorize the program and any funds for it, (3)" added Councilman Weprin.

"The City's Congestion Tax relies on one of the most inefficient revenue streams ever devised with $2 of every $5 collected going to the program and not for transit projects,"(4) explained Corey Bearak, Executive Vice President of the Queens Civic Congress which represents 100 grassroots civic, community, condo, cooperative, homeowner and tenant groups throughout the borough. "More troubling, the promise of federal money does not require the adoption of this Congestion Tax Scheme; further it requires no plan involving congestion fee or tolls on free East River crossings. (5)

"The clear absence of a firm deadline creates an opportunity to engage all stakeholders as London did and design a plan that works for New York City, (6)" explained Mr. McCaffrey.

"Similar to this congestion tax scheme, the advocates for the failed Olympics and the Far West Side stadium pronounced these failed projects, rather than creating a coalition to develop workable, supportable plans," noted Queens Civic Congress President Sean M. Walsh. "The London Olympics upcoming in 2012 and the Jets remaining across the Hudson show the need to work closely with elected officials, community members and borough-based business groups on grand visioning plans."

"The disclosures on the process and funding provide The State Legislature with an opportunity to get New York City on track on an open process that looks at the sound alternatives to a congestion tax scheme that is nothing more than a regressive tax on the middle class," suggested Mr. Weprin. "Alternative measures exist to address congestion and traffic. These include inducements to use mass transit – lower fares, lower express bus fares, reduced intra-city commuter railroad fares, and better bus connections to commuter rails. Traffic abatement measures include the posting of more traffic enforcement agents to avoid "box-blocking" to ensure traffic flow, and changing "blocking the box" from a moving to a parking violation which allows the use of cameras and fines to discourage that traffic-congesting activity."

"A program that will have serious known and unknown impacts on the residents and businesses of New York City should require more than a few short weeks of deliberation and consideration," stated Queens Chamber of Commerce President Albert F. Pennisi, Esq. "Additionally, an Environmental Impact Study should be conducted prior to the start of a 'pilot program.' Realistically, once the infrastructure of this program is in place, even if it is technically only a pilot, it seems unlikely that the fee would ever be rolled back despite any future findings of infeasibility."

"Alternative measures exist to raise revenues for mass transit," added Mr. Bearak. At the Assembly hearing two weeks ago, State legislators raised various sales and mortgage recording taxes. The Queens Civic Congress proposes a revenue-sharing tax on non-city residents so the covered suburban counties benefit pro-rata; New York City would keep the revenue from out of state residents."

"The school system changes include a much-ballyhooed empowerment of parents; why not empower communities in the process aimed at making the city more livable in the future, concluded Mr. Bearak, who also noted the support of the Queens Coalition for Parks and Green Spaces with more than 400 grassroots member organizations.

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NOTES:
(1) [Source: Federal Register –
http://a257.g.akamaitech.net/7/257/2422/01jan20061800/edocket.access.gpo.gov/2006/E6-20924.htm]
(2) [sources: CONGE$TION-PLAN ROADBLOCK IN D.C., NY Post, June 15
(http://www.nypost.com/php/pfriendly/print.php?url=http://www.nypost.com/seven/06152007/news/regionalnews/congetion_plan_roadblock_in_d_c__regionalnews_fredric_u__dicker__state_editor.htm
); http://wcbstv.com/topstories/local_story_165172311.html]
(3) [Source: Rep. Peter DeFazio's letter]
(4) [source: city's proposal: only $380 million net of $620 million projected for transit projects, remainder to the program's system of toll-like reading devices, cameras, etc.]
(5) [Source: http://www.fightgridlocknow.gov/docs/upaqa070402.htm]
(6) [Source: http://www.fightgridlocknow.gov/docs/upaqa070402.htm]