

July 9, 2007

EDITORIAL

Crunch Time for Congestion Pricing

New York is one of nine cities competing for \$1.2 billion that the federal government has set aside for projects to alleviate traffic congestion. New York could win as much as \$500 million, but there's a catch. The deadline to apply is next Monday, and the State Legislature — which has to sign off on the city's plan — irresponsibly recessed last month without taking action.

It's possible that everyone will pull together an agreement on time. But that can only happen if Gov. Eliot Spitzer, Senate Majority Leader Joseph Bruno and Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver put aside their personal differences and divergent agendas.

That's asking a lot. Mr. Bruno and Mr. Spitzer have engaged in a very public disagreement lately — over other issues. Mr. Bruno deserves credit for not letting the acrimony stop him from calling his members back into session next Monday. Mr. Spitzer has publicly supported congestion pricing, but he should be doing more to push it through the Legislature in time to meet the looming federal deadline.

The real immovable force seems to be Mr. Silver, who could kill congestion pricing if he does not call his members back. The Speaker, who sometimes passes for a sphinx, will have to do a lot of explaining. He represents Lower Manhattan, which would benefit enormously from congestion relief.

If the three men, and Mr. Silver in particular, fail to rise to the occasion, they will have squandered a chance to greatly improve transportation and quality of life for their constituents. That isn't overstating it. In London and Stockholm, congestion pricing unclogged streets and reduced toxic tailpipe emissions, which can cause respiratory diseases.

An Assembly report is expected to echo the criticism that labels the congestion fees a tax on working people. But that ignores the fact that only 5 percent of city residents drive to work in the congestion zone. And the plan, done right, would offer them alternatives.

The fees would be spent on improving public transit, including getting express buses and ferries to areas where commuters have few options but cars. Lawmakers haven't identified any other way to pay for maintenance and upgrades for the mass-transit system, which already faces billions in budget shortfalls. Without the fees, riders can expect a major fare hike just to keep the system running.

There are legitimate concerns about exactly how congestion pricing would work. A commission can be appointed later to hammer out the details. But first, the state needs to sign off on a general plan, so New York does not let as much as \$500 million in federal money needlessly slip away.