



Testimony to New York City Traffic Congestion Mitigation Commission

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My name is Joan Byron. I am speaking on behalf of the Pratt Center for Community Development. For forty-five years, the Pratt Center has supported communities working for social, economic, and environmental justice throughout New York City. We, and the community-based organizations we work with, recognize in the many proposals contained in Mayor Bloomberg's PlaNYC 2030 many challenges, some visionary solutions, and an opportunity to take on the inequities now built into the ways that the benefits and burdens of New York City's infrastructure are shared.

We applaud the commission for taking its charge seriously, and delivering an even-handed analysis. The Interim Report clearly shows that 'alternatives' to pricing don't work. They either don't reduce traffic enough, or they don't produce revenue for transit. And by listening to the concerns of people from all parts of the city, whose lives, health, and livelihoods are affected both by congestion, and lack of access to efficient transit, you have improved on the Mayor's original proposal in a number of important ways. Your proposed "Alternative Congestion Pricing Plan" is in many respects more equitable, more cost-effective, and less invasive than Mayor Bloomberg's plan. The Pratt Center supports it, and thanks you for taking a thoughtful approach to a complex set of problems.

We re-affirm our support for congestion pricing on the grounds of sustainability and environmental justice. Our own research, and the first-hand testimony of residents of New York's low-income neighborhoods and communities of color confirm that driving to Manhattan's Central Business District is a privilege enjoyed by the most whitest and most affluent populations, whose convenience we have for too long prized above the basic human rights of everyone else.

Meanwhile, working-class people of all colors are left waiting for the bus, and packed into the subway. New York City's children breathe the exhaust of people who drive by with their windows rolled up; seniors traverse streets engineered for cars to move at maximum speed, rather than to allow them to walk safely, and people with disabilities are trapped and frustrated by a system designed for the able-bodied.

We live in a city segregated by race and class. Increasingly, the neighborhoods where immigrants and working-class people can afford to live are the ones beyond the reach of the subway system, or between its lines, or in places where the trains are so crowded that not one more person can squeeze in.

Over 750,000 New Yorkers – people living within the five boroughs – now have commutes of over an hour, every day. And two-thirds – almost 460,000 – are on their way to jobs paying \$35,000 or less. These New Yorkers aren't driving to Manhattan – they're taking the train, or a bus and a train, or two buses and a train. These are the people who support congestion pricing if – IF – they know that its revenue will bring transit improvements that will ease their pain.

Our transit system needs to expand and improve – in ways that are fast, cost-effective, and that will serve the people who depend on it the most. Fancy new commuter rail stations, and projects like a downtown rail link that will speed a few thousand frequent fliers to JFK, are not only years away, they don't solve the pressing problems of real New Yorkers – people who live within our five boroughs – whose trips to work now so long that they are undermining the lives of families and communities, as well as our whole economy.

This is a moment of extraordinary opportunity, which this commission can ensure that we seize. Congestion pricing can not only make the money available to implement transit improvements focused on the needs of New Yorkers – it can also free up the street space to make those improvements possible. And we now have leadership at New York City DOT, and at the MTA, that is committed to the kinds of collaboration that make visionary change happen.

Within the timeframe laid out for the implementation of congestion pricing, New York could have a state-of-the-art Bus Rapid Transit system up and running, serving neighborhoods like East Elmhurst, Queens, Soundview in the Bronx, Morningside Heights in Manhattan, East Flatbush in Brooklyn, and the North Shore of Staten Island. Bus Rapid Transit may sound like an oxymoron - but millions of people from Bogotá, Colombia to Vancouver, Canada, to Jakarta, Indonesia know it's a reality that works.

A combination of dedicated bus lanes – lanes protected by curbs, not paint; electronics that synchronize bus movements with traffic signals; and bus stops where riders pay their fares before the bus arrives, enable BRT systems to move tens of thousands of people per hour, a volume comparable to subways and light rail. Unlike subway and rail, a BRT system can be constructed in months rather than years, with routes that can be extended and modified as ridership grows. BRT is not only fast and cost-effective, it's accessible to people who depend on transit and can't easily ride the subway – seniors, parents traveling with kids, and people with disabilities. These are entire populations whose only transit option today is the local bus system, and who are effectively trapped within the short distance a local bus traveling at 3.6 miles per hour can cover.

Mayor Bloomberg's PlaNYC 2030 proposes to spend \$900 million – of a total plan for \$50 billion - over the next ten years on a minimal BRT program; and talk on the street is that even the modest initial target of one BRT route per borough may be scaled back. We hear that the plan for a BRT route serving East Flatbush – home one of the largest concentrations of working-class, long-haul commuters - may be on hold.

This commission can push the administration, and the MTA, to do more rather than less. Your final recommendations should include:

- fast-tracking Bus Rapid Transit
- creating routes that cross our bridges on new, dedicated lanes, and take people from Brooklyn, the Bronx, Queens, and Staten Island to and through Manhattan
- building station-stops that allow people to pay their fares before boarding
- electronic information and control systems that maximize speed and reliability

The two-hours or more each day that three-quarter million New Yorkers now spend commuting come at the expense of family time, participation in community life, and access to health care, education economic opportunity. Getting cars off our streets through congestion pricing is one half of the solution, and an aggressive program of transit improvements is the other.

So we thank you for your hard work in the months since the Commission was first convened, and we urge you to go the next mile, and include in your final recommendations a mandate for the implementation of Bus Rapid Transit at a scale and speed that will make a difference to the people who need it the most – the 750,000 New Yorkers taking that one-hour ride every day.

Attachments: maps and analysis of New York commuting times by race and income, BRT fact sheet

NOTE: This testimony was prepared by the Pratt Center for Community Development. It does not necessarily reflect the official position of Pratt Institute.