Community Boards scrutinize mayor’s congestion plan

By Chris Lombardi

Members of Midtown’s three community boards converged at FIT on Monday to weigh in on Mayor Bloomberg’s controversial congestion pricing proposal.

With a July 17 state approval deadline looming for the plan to receive federal funds, and amid new questions raised about the plan’s fairness, a joint hearing held by Community Boards 4, 5 and 6 brought together representatives of PlaNYC, members of all three boards, elected officials and skeptical residents for a spirited discussion.

Concerns had already been raised in all three boards, with C.B. 4’s Transportation Planning Committee voting 5–4 to attach fairly stringent conditions to their support of the plan. The Transportation and Environment Committee of C.B. 5 was set to meet right after the hearing for a vote.
As the nearly 75 attendees filled chairs in the hearing room, local opponents of congestion pricing murmured to one side, “Bloomberg, phony bastard, rides around in limos.... It’s very unfair taxation.... This is going to drive more people out of the city.” Meanwhile, advocates from Transportation Alternatives (TA) and the West Side Neighborhood Alliance collected signatures for a “Clear the Air” petition to present to Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver.

Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer, who opened the forum, spoke first about Richard Brodsky, a Westchester County assemblyman who had just released a report claiming the cost of the plan would be borne by lower-income drivers.

"Today a former colleague of mine held a press conference, claiming that this plan hurts New Yorkers,” said Stringer, a former member of the Assembly. “We’re talking about someone [referring to Brodsky] who for 25 years was against the CFE [Campaign for Fiscal Equity] lawsuit [for more funds for city schools], and who helped kill the commuter tax in 1994. Now he’s for poor New Yorkers?” Transit advocates had already pointed out to Chelsea Now that Brodsky had received more than $16,000 in campaign funds over the past five years from parking garage owners.

Stringer went on to urge New York to join other major cities in mass transit’s future.

“I’m sick of hearing about [how] London’s commercial district is booming because traffic was reduced by so much,” said Stringer. “I hate hearing about Bogota, Colombia, where they didn’t build a single new highway but poured everything into bus rapid transit, and a whole new city grew. People are changing their habits; they’re biking and taking buses.”

What’s most important, Stringer said, is for New York to gain access to a stable funding base, from which to construct a world-class mass transit infrastructure. And the first step, he said, was “not to relinquish New York’s claim to [those] federal funds.”

Stringer was referring to the city’s application to the federal Department of Transportation (DOT) for a $536.9 million share of $2.5 billion in traffic congestion funds, which would include EZ-Pass readers, cameras and processing technologies, a fleet of 367 super-fast buses and an upgraded East River ferry service. Advocates told Chelsea Now this week that DOT officials, eager for a high-profile experiment in reducing congestion, have already tweaked the process to keep New York in the running.

“They [the federal government] really want to give New York this money,” said Matthew Roth, director of TA’s Street Renaissance Project and co-chair of Citywide Coalition for Traffic Relief. “All they need now is a one-line letter from the Legislature, that they support the idea.”

Assemblyman Richard Gottfried, the only panelist present at the forum who is eligible to vote on the plan, told the audience, “I support the concept” of congestion pricing, while saying that he understood opponents’ concerns. “There are details we want to see changed: For example, today’s technology enables us to charge on a sliding scale” and give lower-income drivers a break on the charge. “But these are details that can easily be resolved, and it’s important to get started,” he said.

Those details were the subject of the rest of the forum, after brief presentations by Rohit Aggarwala, the city’s sustainability director, and Dani Simons, who, after years with TA, had just become the city DOT’s director of e-media.

The real genius of the plan, said Simons, was the $30 billion in estimated revenue from the congestion charge, which would become a dedicated, stable base of funding for mass transit—meaning no more annual battles in Albany about transit funds.

“As someone who voted for the Second Avenue subway three times,” commented Gottfried, “that would be a big relief.”

Both Simons and Aggarwala stressed the proposal’s overall citywide benefits—better air quality and improved transit—for the majority who do not rely on their automobiles to get to work. Aggarwala said that the congestion charge was “the most efficient means” to get people to make different decisions about the way they drive. And both dismissed Brodsky’s claims about a “tax on the poor,” since only 5 percent of Manhattan residents use their cars to get to work, and “numbers show that the average salary for a Manhattan driver is $173,000 a year.”
Shortly thereafter, numerous residents and community board members, many of whom spoke more from their own communities than from PlaNYC’s citywide perspective, challenged the latter number.

“I don’t make $150,000 a year, and I have a car,” said C.B. 4’s Miguel Acevedo. “I live with four kids, one with asthma. And [I know low-income people who] have to use a car to commute to New Jersey—to a place where there is no public transit!”

Even the boards’ transportation committees, who seemed generally in favor of the plan, had numerous questions about the details. “Our issue is the Lincoln Tunnel. [Commuters] get a free pass, if they go [from there] straight to the Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel,” said Acevedo, referring to the much publicized exemption cars will get under the current congestion pricing plan, which will spare them the fee if they traverse Manhattan using bridges or tunnels on either side.

In addition, said Acevedo, “[What about] not-for-profits that deliver to our elderly and our seniors. Will they get an exemption [from the $21 truck charge]? Aggarwala assured him that “we’re open to talking about those sort of exemptions.”

C.B. 4 board chair J.D. Nolan had an even more local question. “[The plan] means more buses. What about a bus garage? What about allowing private express buses to use them?” he asked, to a big round of applause.

Aggarwala smiled: “As a resident of C.B. 4, I know about congestion on Ninth Avenue,” said the Hell’s Kitchen denizen.

“Now I know we’ll get a garage,” quipped Nolan, who then nodded when Aggarwala said that with the dedicated funding, it would be politically feasible to expand a proposed Port Authority garage to accommodate express and private tour buses as well.

Lyle Frank of C.B. 6 was concerned about the truck fee’s ripple effects. “I’ve had a business with various trucks moving in and out,” he said. “To small businesses, a $21 charge is a tax.” A former retailer from the East Side agreed with him, calling the fee “a catalyst and trigger for price increases.” Aggarwala pointed out that most trucks would pay less, since their bridge tolls would be deducted, and would only pay $7 if they used clean diesel technology. But opponents seemed unconvinced.

Others in fierce opposition included musician J.C. Levy, who said, “I have to transport my instruments” and found the plan “onerous to residents,” and Veronika Conant of the 54th Street Block Association, who feared that construction and deliveries on her block near the Museum of Modern Art would switch to a nighttime schedule and cause more noise.

“[Transit planning] must not impact our quality of life,” said Conant. “I am in favor of public transit but not this.”

Cycling advocates, on the other hand, hailed the plan’s promise to lessen traffic and improve bike lanes. “The best way to get around New York is by bike!” exulted David Warren, of the West Side Neighborhood Alliance. “I’m very much in favor,” said Abby Smith of the bisexual cycling group Bi and Large, though she urged that the new traffic agents slated to be hired under the plan be more willing to take risks and actually enforce the new laws.

When the event was over, C.B. 5’s Transportation and Environment Committee met in a quick session and voted 4–0 to endorse the plan, though with a list of concerns attached. Committee Chair John Mills told Chelsea Now on Tuesday that the list included the truck charges, an exemption for taxis and charges for leaving the zone, all of which are part of the current plan.

Mills and the other organizers were satisfied with the event, and relieved it had only lasted three hours. Meanwhile the petitions being collected by the West Side Alliance were being prepared for delivery to the office of Speaker Silver, and advocates prepared to meet with legislators to urge a miracle in Albany.

“We’re hopeful that [Silver’s silence] is posturing, and he’ll do the right thing.” TA’s Matthew Roth said on Thursday. If not, he added, he’s ready to start over and persevere until New Yorkers realize the plan makes sense. “No one else,” he said, “is proposing something that impacts both congestion and funds transit for the next 25 years.”