



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

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IN THE NEWS - Staten Island Advance: Verrazano toll relief is a victory for Staten Island

ANDREW J LANZA March 12, 2013

For as long as anyone around here can remember, Staten Islanders have complained about the across-the-board hardship caused by high bridge tolls. And for as long as anyone around here can remember, those complaints have fallen on deaf ears.

Staten Islanders' plight might have elicited some empty expressions of sympathy — and, more recently, programs that offer slight resident discounts, perhaps — but little else.

And the tolls on both the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's Verrazano-Narrows Bridge and the Port Authority's three Staten Island-New Jersey bridges just kept going up.

The base cash toll on the three P.A. bridges is now \$13 and the base cash toll on the Verrazano is a staggering \$15. Of course, Staten Islanders who have E-ZPass and are enrolled in the resident discount program don't pay nearly that much. But even the \$6 residents with E-ZPass have to fork over to cross the Verrazano is nothing to sneeze at, especially these days.

But things may be changing, thanks, in large part, to this borough's improving standing in city and state government. The big guys are paying attention, for once.

Last June, after the Port Authority imposed whopping toll hikes on its bridges, Gov. Andrew Cuomo, backed by state Sen. Andrew Lanza and Assemblyman Michael Cusick, brokered a deal which allows enrolled Staten Islanders to cross the P.A. bridges for \$4.75 after a

minimum two trips.

Now, even more shocking, Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver, not usually seen as a friend to Staten Island, agreed to support legislation to allow a \$5.50 toll for Staten Island residents on the Verrazano. That's what the toll had been before the most recent increase was implemented earlier this month.

The measure, which is included in the Assembly's budget, would also cut V-N tolls for Staten Island-based commercial vehicles by 50 percent.

The initiative comes just days after members of the Chamber of Commerce traveled to Albany to lobby for a toll discount for trucks, which are especially hard hit by high tolls. Their message got through to Mr. Silver, apparently. And keep in mind that any bill the speaker of the Assembly supports passes in the Assembly.

(All of Staten Island's state lawmakers support the Verrazano discounts, of course. But Republican Assembly members Nicole Malliotakis and Joe Borelli, have been placed in a difficult position. The Democratic leadership inserted in the budget a provision that would provide tuition assistance for illegal aliens under the state's version of the DREAM Act. Both lawmakers oppose it, but if they vote against the budget because of it, they've be voting against the toll discount. The Assembly should vote on the DREAM Act separately, not bundle it with the budget.)

A similar discount provision is expected to be included in the state Senate's budget proposal and will pass with bipartisan support in that Chamber.

Nor is there doubt that Gov. Cuomo will eventually approve the additional toll discount, given what he has said about the "unfair burden" Staten Island drivers and businesses bear.

Mr. Silver declared that he was "pleased that the Assembly Majority's budget proposal will provide real relief for residents and businesses who for too long have had to live with high tolls."

His acknowledgment of that reality is as important as the discount itself.

Chamber president and CEO Linda Baran called this "an enormous breakthrough" for Staten Island residents and businesses.

She added, "By recognizing the immediate need for relief on the Verrazano Bridge for commercial vehicles, Speaker Silver has moved our borough one step closer to a fair, equitable and regional toll plan."

It's a big step closer, no doubt. But as long as some drivers pay no tolls to get from one borough to another and Staten Islanders pay even \$5.50 to drive into their home borough, we're still a ways away from true toll equity. That won't come, as Livingston resident and MTA Board member Allen Cappelli has noted, until the entire regional toll system is overhauled.

That's a fight for the future. For now, Staten Islanders can savor a toll victory.

By **Staten Island Advance Editorial** on March 10, 2013 at 5:42 AM, updated March 10, 2013 at 6:58 AM

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