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Congestion pricing isn't really about congestion

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A pervasive feeling of disappointment swept Long Island two weeks ago, after the Metropolitan Transportation Authority board formally voted to roll out congestion pricing in New York City. The policy creates new charges of \$15 for passenger vehicles, \$24 to \$36 for trucks, and \$7.50 for motorcycles to enter Manhattan below 60th Street.

You may wonder why 60th Street was chosen as the demarcation line for this new regressive tax. It's clear that it was selected because it will capture all cars traveling through the Midtown Tunnel and over the 59th Street Bridge, the two most common routes into Manhattan for Long Islanders. Whether you're a senior citizen on your way to a doctor's appointment or a family driving in to shop or see a Broadway show, you'll have to pay this regressive tax regardless of your tax bracket. Those who will bear this burden consistently are the business owners and employees who must drive to work because, for one reason or another, public transportation isn't an option for them.

In my first year as a state senator, I have watched taxes and fees pile up, with no relief from Albany. Instituting congestion pricing certainly compounds our collective concern that Albany Democrats believe that Long Island's hard-working middle class should shoulder an unfair share of the MTA's financial burden, even if the agency's financial shortfall is created by its own mismanagement.

Many of us are grappling with economic challenges, and the migration trends of recent years speak volumes about the lack of relief for New Yorkers. Hundreds of thousands have relocate to states that offer lower taxes, fewer regulations and a better quality of life. It's obvious to Long Islanders that one-party rule has gotten our state's priorities backward, and it's crucial for us to ask why Albany Democrats persist in pushing policies that benefit only a few while squeezing an already strained working class.

Congestion pricing is misnamed, because it's not about reducing congestion in Manhattan. The MTA is counting on people to continue driving into the city — otherwise it would not have included the expected revenue in its budget. This is simply another fee to generate more income in order to solve the MTA's financial problems.

It was interesting to hear that the MTA is finally cracking down on fare evaders who aren't paying tolls, so it won't miss out on the newly imposed fees. Why wasn't that done before the implementation of congestion pricing? The MTA should have ensured that it was collecting revenue being lost by fake or illegally covered license plates before asking for a raise.

Although the many criminal justice reform policies from Albany Democrats have left rule followers vulnerable, toll and fare evaders seem to enjoy leniency. Why isn't the MTA focusing on penalizing their indiscretions, rather than levying hefty charges on the rest of us? This regressive taxation policy will continue to allow the MTA to pick our pockets while the real culprits walk away free. It's an unjust system that we cannot allow to continue.

While law-abiding citizens are expected to foot the bill for the MTA's mismanagement, there seems to be no consequence for its digging itself into a deeper financial hole. The Senate Republican conference called for a forensic audit of the MTA's finances nearly a year ago, yet the request remains unanswered. In my own district, the Valley Stream Long Island Rail Road station remains in disrepair after years of requests from village officials, and Floral Park continues to negotiate with the MTA for refusing to honor its agreement to install bushes and fencing related to the third rail project. If the agency has no funds for these simple projections, where is all the money going?

Our collective opposition to congestion pricing isn't about resisting change, but rather about standing up for the well-being of our middle class. We must crack down on fare evasion and demand accountability for the MTA's spending practices. It's high time the needs of families, those with disabilities, the elderly, small businesses, and those who cannot rely on the subways are genuinely considered.

We are witnessing a shrinking middle class, and policies like congestion pricing only accelerate the exodus of our fellow New Yorkers. It's time for the governor and Albany Democrats, who are in control, to champion policies that genuinely take into account the needs of all, and implement policies that promote fairness and ensure prosperity in our suburban communities. If the MTA board fails to become more transparent and accountable, and continues to refuse to evaluate the impact of its policies on law-abiding, middle-class people, there will come a point when there's no one left to support its mismanagement.

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