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Congestion pricing punishes commuters

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In 2019, the Democratic majorities in the State Senate and Assembly passed the well-known Congestion Pricing Plan. At the time, every Long Island Senate Democrat voted in support of the proposal. The policy mandated an extra fee for most motorists entering Manhattan below 60th Street during peak hours. While the intent behind this initiative may be commendable, its repercussions for commuters — particularly those from Nassau County — are concerning.

Last week, Gov. Kathy Hochul announced that she was delaying the implementation of congestion pricing. I commend those of us on the Island who voiced our objections to the plan and made our voices heard. This is a victory for Long Islanders who simply can't afford another tax. It is disappointing that Hochul's decision was clearly motivated by politics rather than concern for overburdened New Yorkers, and after a substantial expenditure was made on the required infrastructure.

Elected officials should be held accountable for their actions, and a last-minute effort to postpone the plan in hopes of avoiding accountability from voters in the upcoming election is shameful. Congestion pricing shouldn't just be delayed; it must be repealed, and I am a cosponsor of Senate Bill 5425, which would do just that.

Congestion pricing is being promoted as a solution to reduce traffic and emissions, but in reality, its sole purpose is to generate revenue to fix the continuing mismanagement of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority. The state budget includes \$1 billion of revenue for the MTA, which is expected to be generated by congestion pricing, so clearly there is an expectation that many people will continue to drive and pay the price rather than use public transportation. Many from Nassau County travel to Manhattan for work or medical appointments, or to visit family and friends.

The additional charge would be more than just an inconvenience — it's a regressive tax that disproportionately impacts our families, small-business owners and those who depend on their vehicles to earn a living. Congestion pricing won't alleviate traffic or save our environment; instead, it will increase the cost of traveling to Manhattan, and may actually deter people from doing so to enjoy themselves. For those who must travel into the city for work, it will increase their costs, which will in turn be passed on to the consumers of their products.

For many Nassau County residents, driving into Manhattan isn't a luxury, but a necessity. Nurses working the night shift at hospitals, teachers who need to carry supplies and arrive early in the morning, and those with physical challenges who travel to take advantage of world-class medical care have legitimate reasons for driving into Manhattan. Travel into the city is already fraught with challenges for those who use public transportation, making driving the most convenient, and sometimes the only, option. The introduction of an additional fee, potentially as high as \$15 per trip, would be a significant financial burden. The policy would effectively penalize hard-working New Yorkers who have no viable alternative to driving.

Public transportation is a valuable asset, but it isn't a one-size-fits-all solution. For many, using public transit means enduring multiple transfers, which can extend commute times to unmanageable lengths. Instead of punishing those who have no choice but to drive, we must prioritize investing in our public transportation infrastructure to make it more reliable and accessible.

The MTA's recent decision to offer a 10 percent discount on monthly Long Island Rail Road tickets is a step forward, but it unfairly excludes residents of Nassau and Suffolk counties. The discount applies only to travel within New York City, funded by a state account for city transit improvements, leaving Long Island commuters out. This exclusion, combined with congestion pricing, would further burden them. Both policies highlight a growing disparity, neglecting the needs of suburban commuters who play a vital role in the city's economy. We must address this imbalance and ensure equitable support for all LIRR riders.

While reducing traffic congestion and emissions are important, the congestion-pricing plan, as it stands, is a misguided approach to correcting the MTA's fiscal mismanagement, doing so by putting the burden on the backs of commuters. By continuing to advocate for our constituents, exploring alternative solutions and engaging the public, we can work toward a more equitable strategy.

Now that this plan is delayed, we must seize the opportunity to repeal it. The time is now. We need solutions that address traffic congestion without unfairly hurting the wallets of Long Islanders.

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