



Testimony to New York City Council Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure

*Re: Congestion Pricing is the Law.
New York City Should Make the Most of It*

August 16, 2023

Reinvent Albany submits this written testimony for the Committee’s oversight hearing regarding implementation of congestion pricing in New York City. We advocate for more transparent and accountable New York government, including for authorities like the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA).

We urge the New York City Council to strongly support the MTA’s implementation of congestion pricing for the NYC central business district (CBD).

Congestion pricing is tailor-made for the incredible density and levels of activity – and the transit accessibility and walking orientation – of the area within and around the City’s central business district. Congestion pricing will provide the MTA with much needed funds for improving subway and bus service. More important to the City Council and Mayor, congestion pricing will reduce traffic congestion and car trips. This will free up street space that can be repurposed as bus and bike lanes, and pedestrian and public space improvements.

Congestion pricing is happening

As the City Council well knows, congestion pricing for the central business district has been state law since 2019 and the MTA’s extensive environmental review was approved by the federal government earlier this year with a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI). The MTA and the Traffic Mobility Review Board (TMRB) are currently developing a specific toll schedule and anticipate turning the system on in early 2024. Some of the tolling hardware is already installed on city streets.

Tolls should maximize congestion reduction with minimal exemptions

With implementation pending, we urge the Council to support the following as the MTA and TMRB finalize congestion pricing details:

1. The law establishing congestion pricing already provides reasonable exemptions for emergency vehicles and those transporting people with disabilities, as well as a state tax credit for toll payers making less than \$60,000 who live in the zone. The Council should strongly support these basic exemptions and restrain itself from pandering to the multitude of special interests seeking their own. Every new exemption means higher tolls for those who do pay. State law requires congestion pricing to collect enough in tolls to support \$15 billion in MTA bonds for its 2020-2024 capital program. We underline: new exemptions are not a free lunch. Somebody has to pay the tolls, and that somebody is the general driving public.
2. We urge the Council to explicitly oppose toll exemptions for government employees, board members and retirees. It is not the job of MTA transit riders and toll payers to subsidize current and past government employees. If state or city government bodies want to reimburse their employees for congestion pricing fees, they can do that transparently and on the books during their annual budget processes.
3. Congestion pricing has the potential to divert large numbers of motorists from across the region to mass transit. The Council should encourage this shift by urging the MTA to exempt public and private commuter buses from congestion pricing tolls.
4. The Council should support a per-ride congestion fee on for-hire vehicles that is paid by the passenger, rather than a once per day toll paid by the driver. Given the intensity of for-hire-vehicle use in the central business district, an increase in passenger fees would contribute significantly to the program's overall revenue and traffic relief goals.
5. The MTA should smartly use credits on some already tolled facilities to reduce excess travel and toll shopping, particularly through environmental justice communities — a key focus of the federal review — and to create strong program benefits in CBD-adjacent areas.

Where is the City of New York?

We urge the City Council and Mayor to look at congestion pricing as a big opportunity to get more value from city streets, which can easily be modified to move far more people and goods in a safer and less polluting way.

Successful congestion pricing plans implemented in London and Stockholm have included big transit, bicycling and public space “carrots” that take advantage of congestion pricing’s “street space dividend.” Bus lanes in particular can provide better

transit service and can be easily expanded when traffic is reduced. Bus lanes are the City's job, and the City failed badly in meeting bus lane implementation targets in 2022, and nothing bus-related tied to congestion pricing has been proposed by the Adams Administration.

The bike network too should receive special attention related to congestion pricing. DOT is talking about widening some busy bike lanes to make more space for both e-bikes and traditional pedal bicycles, but has so far proposed only one project (3rd Ave on the Upper East Side) in a year when the City is seeing extraordinary levels of cycling fatalities. Wider bike lanes in and around the CBD should be a prime use of congestion pricing's space dividend.

Key bike network connections are also still lacking in CBD adjacent areas including Downtown Brooklyn, Long Island City and Astoria, the Upper East and West Sides, and Harlem.

The Council should urge Mayor Adams to get with the program and bring the City's considerable authority and resources to congestion pricing policy making, particularly in the areas of bus and bike lanes.