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POSTOPINION

THE SMART WAY TO CURB TRAFFIC

THE cost to use the seven New York City bridges and two tunnels operated by New York State's Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) rose last week for the fifth time in seven years.

Yet by a strange quirk of fate, four of the city's most heavily used crossings — the Brooklyn, Manhattan, Williamsburg and Queensboro bridges — remain free for the 104th consecutive year.

This bizarre tolling system, in which the city-owned bridges are free while the state-owned crossings charge a toll, is robbing our cash-strapped transportation network of needed revenues, while encouraging motorists to drive right into the teeth of the city's most traffic-clogged neighborhoods.

Fortunately, a new, far more logical proposal, called the Move NY

[The Move NY plan] would cut tolls by up to 48 percent on . . . seven MTA bridges.]

Fair Plan, is gaining support from a broad coalition of transit, environment, labor, economic-justice and business groups, including the New York Motor State Truck Association and the New York Building Congress.

The Move NY plan would scrap the current tolling system and instead charge the exact same toll at every entry point into Manhattan's economic core. That includes the already tolled MTA tunnels and the four free East River bridges, as well as the avenues that cross 60th Street.

Move NY also would cut tolls by up to 48 percent on the seven MTA bridges that don't lead to Manhattan's core.

The toll-cutting makes this plan significantly different from Mayor Michael Bloomberg's failed "congestion pricing."

His idea, which was rejected in 2008, also proposed new fees, but it offered no offsetting reductions. That angered the Brooklyn and Queens drivers who would have borne the brunt of the new charges.

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Despite the lower tolls, Move NY would generate \$1.5 billion in new funds every year.

Three-quarters of that revenue would go toward upgrades of the region's mass-transit system, while the remainder would be used to improve roads and bridges. In both cases, that money is sorely needed.

The new system would also — *finally* — put an end to toll-shopping. Thanks to the fairer tolls, commercial vehicles heading from Long Island to New Jersey would opt to take the Verrazano Bridge (which now costs up to \$80 to cross) instead of clogging the local streets that lead to and from the antiquated Manhattan Bridge. Besides easing congestion, this would also improve safety on local streets.

Similarly, in Western Queens, there would no longer be any reason for thousands of drivers to exit the major highways and clog city streets to take the Queensborough Bridge, which is free, rather than the Triborough Bridge or Midtown Tunnel, which charge tolls.

By Move NY's calculations, this far more rational approach would cut travel times by 15 percent to 20 percent — translating into nearly 100 million hours of time saved each year. Not insignificantly, these time savings, along with the ability to improve transit service, would unlock \$2.8 billion in annual economic output and produce 30,000 new jobs.

There isn't a better time to act on this than now. The MTA recently proposed a five-year, \$32 billion capital plan to modernize and expand its network of subways, trains, buses, roads, bridges and tunnels — but funding has been identified for only about half of this.

With the agency already deep in debt and with little prospect for additional city, state or federal funding, Gov. Cuomo and the state Legislature have two options: They can preside over a steady decline in the region's transportation network and the state's prospects for economic growth.

Or they can close the MTA's funding gap — while improving driving conditions — by adopting the Move NY plan and reaping the new revenues it will bring.

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