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Trottenberg on bridge tolls and ‘byzantine’ infrastructure

By Nidhi Prakash



The East River bridges. (AP Photo/Mark Lennihan)

Transportation commissioner Polly Trottenberg said on Tuesday that poll results shouldn't guide the city's policy toward congestion-based pricing.

“There has never been a single poll where you ask people to pay for something and the majority of them said yes, so if you rely on the polls, it’s not going to happen,” said Trottenberg at a New York Building Congress forum in Manhattan this morning. “So these things require leadership and sometimes not just looking at the polls but deciding that these are important investments we need to go ahead with.”

A Quinnipiac University poll last week found voters had mixed responses—49 percent against and 41 percent in favor—to the idea of introducing tolls on the East River bridges, while reducing them on the bridges between the Bronx, Queens, Brooklyn, and Staten Island.

Trottenberg, who appeared alongside state transportation commissioner Joan McDonald, also discussed the complications caused by the thorny jurisdiction on the city's roads and bridges.

“My favorite example, the F.D.R. Drive, ownership between the city and the state switches back and forth ten times, not clear why, something about built and un-built, and we built this and that over the years,” she said.

She said that though the city has a working relationship with the state, getting major projects completed can be difficult.

“The byzantine nature of the ownership of the roadways, the bridges, the onramps, it can be challenging,” said Trottenberg.

Both commissioners said the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, which is currently the subject of multiple investigations for its politically motivated lane closures, plays an important role in the region and needs to emerge from its current troubles to function at its best.

“When I worked up in Albany they were the premier agency, and I think they’re focused on bringing it back to being a premier agency and the governor is committed to that,” said McDonald.

A special panel created by governors Andrew Cuomo and Chris Christie is due to issue its report by early July.

“Not to pre-judge how that whole debate is going to play out, but clearly in this region there is a role for a strong bi-State agency that’s got deep expertise and deep ability to handle major capital projects, and I think we’re all hoping when we get to the end of this turmoil that that’s what we’ll have,” said Trottenberg.

Pointing to the need for better infrastructure to support New York City’s bus network and relieve overcrowded bus terminals, Trottenberg said she hoped to work with the Port Authority on the issue.

“Everywhere I travel in the city it’s a huge issue, especially as the West Side gets more developed with residential development. We’re going to be thinking together about how are we going to tackle this problem,” she said.