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Avella slams East River tolls

Leaders join councilman in call to halt MTA's plan to close budget gap

By Philip Newman



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Councilman Tony Avella denounces a plan to place tolls on East River bridges during a press conference with Corey Bearak, (l. to r.) a founding member of the Queens Civic Congress; Jack Friedman, executive vice president of the Queens Chamber of Commerce; and Bob Friedrich, president of the Glen Oaks Village co-op.
Photo by Philip Newman

Queens elected officials and civic leaders have expressed what City Councilman Tony Avella (D-Bayside) called a “resounding no” to tolls on East River bridges as a way to rescue the financially beleaguered MTA.

“While I understand the severity of the budget situation the MTA is facing, I am strongly opposed to placing this financial burden on New Yorkers and especially on those who [are] least able to pay for fare increases and suffer through service reductions,” Avella said at a City Hall news conference Monday.

“We are here today to give a resounding ‘no’ to tolls on East River bridges,” Avella said. “It’s unacceptable.”

Avella introduced speakers from the Queens Civic Congress, Queens Chamber of Commerce and Keep NYC Free Coalition, among others, who all denounced the tolls.

Jack Friedman, executive vice president of the Queens Chamber of Commerce, said, “Three years ago this month, the Queens Chamber issued its report making clear of the deleterious impact of any imposition of new tolling. In New York’s current economic state, any such scheme threatens most irreparable harm on a most fragile economy.”

Bob Friedrich, president of the Glen Oaks Village co-op, called the tolls “A Manhattan-centric, ill-conceived program to create a tolled moat around the island of Manhattan.”

“It won’t cost Manhattanites who work Downtown one penny, but the cost burden will surely fall on the backs of the outer borough taxpayers,” Friedrich said.

“Our community has many small business folks who will be charged this new commuter tax each time they cross in and out of Manhattan,” Friedrich said. “What is the plumber or electrician supposed to do, carry a hundred-pound box of tools on the bus?”

The tolls to be imposed on 13 bridges on the East and Harlem rivers were among recommendations of the Ravitch Commission to rescue the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, which faces a \$1.2 billion budget gap, and says with a bailout will be forced to raise fares by as much as 23 percent and begin deep cuts in services, including ending service completely on many bus lines and two subway lines.

State Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver (D-Manhattan) has expressed support for the tolls.

The Queens Civic Congress has suggested that instead of bridge tolls, the MTA should consider raising motor fuel taxes, auto registration fees and parking fines and fees, as well as a regional payroll tax, which the Ravitch Commission also recommended.

Motorists of eastern Queens have long complained that they must drive into Manhattan because their area is inadequately served by subways and buses.

The Ravitch Commission specified that proceeds from the bridge tolls go toward increasing rapid transit express buses from areas like and including eastern Queens.

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