Position Statement on the Move NY Fair Plan

The NY Metro Chapter of the American Planning Association is a professional, educational, and advocacy organization representing over 1,400 practicing planners and policy makers in New York City and its surrounding suburbs. We are part of a national association with a membership of 41,000 professionals and students who are engaged in programs and projects related to the physical, social and economic environment. In our role as a professional advocacy organization, we offer insights and recommendations on policy matters affecting issues such as housing, transportation and the environment.

Of particular interest to the Chapter is the proposal for the Move NY Fair Plan to institute fares for entering Manhattan’s central business district and to substantially change the method for tolling the City’s major bridges.

BACKGROUND

The Move NY Fair Plan was first proposed by Sam Schwartz, P.E., a former Commissioner at NYC Department of Transportation and now the C.E.O. of Sam Schwartz Engineering. The plan is now championed by a coalition of sixty-five local community organizations, unions and businesses.

The goal of the plan is to raise much needed funding for transportation and transit projects in an era where traditional funding sources are dwindling while transit ridership and traffic congestion are at all time highs. The major elements of the plan are to establish tolls for vehicles entering the “central business district” of Manhattan (defined as the area south of 60th Street); establish tolls for the city-owned East River crossings and to lower the tolls on certain MTA-owned bridges.

The intent is to eliminate the current situation where local streets and non-toll bridges, such as the Brooklyn and Manhattan, experience traffic volumes at or over capacity while larger and wider toll bridges with approach ramps from high-capacity expressways, such as the RFK (formerly the Triborough) are relatively underutilized. It would be hard to say that any of the City’s major highways and bridges are underutilized, but it can be argued that the local streets and free bridges carry a disproportionate share of the total. The other main objective is to rectify economic inequities inherent in the current fare system, hence the name “Fair” Plan.

The plan is reminiscent of the Congestion Pricing plan proposed by Mayor Bloomberg in 2008. That plan failed to win approval in the State legislature, largely due to opposition from key...
Assemblymembers regarding potential congestion just outside of the designated boundaries and the alleged regressive nature of the tolls. There are key differences, however, between the current proposal and the earlier effort.

The Bloomberg Plan imposed a fee on all but certain exempted vehicles (i.e., taxis and emergency vehicles) to enter a defined zone within Manhattan, generally everything south of 60th Street, between the hours of 6:00am and 6:00 pm on weekdays. The Move NY proposal does replicate the idea of establishing a toll to cross 60th Street, but does not include a plan to vary the fee based on time of day, other than to recommend that peak hour pricing be explored by MTA in the future. The Bloomberg Plan did not include what Move NY is calling a “toll swap”, by which tolls would now be charged for the four free East River crossings but lowered on several of the currently tolled bridges (Throgs Neck, Whitestone, RFK/Triborough, Verrazano).

**BENEFITS OF THE PLAN**

It is hard to argue about the basic premise - current policies and jurisdictional boundaries have created a situation where motorists, particularly drivers of large trucks, are incentivized to use the local streets least able to accommodate the traffic volume or vehicle weight. One need only to sit in the line of cars along Van Dam Street on a typical day as thousands of vehicles exit the Long Island Expressway heading towards the Ed Koch Queensboro Bridge in an effort to avoid the tolls of the Queens-Midtown Tunnel to appreciate the nature of the problem.

By changing the existing tolling policies, Move NY seeks to direct large volumes of traffic, especially heavy trucks, around Manhattan not through it. Eliminating, or at least reducing, the phenomenon referred to as “bridge shopping” can be expected to significantly relieve congestion in the neighborhoods abutting the free bridges and reduce the wear and tear of heavy vehicles on local streets.

Move NY calls for the use of intelligent electronic tolling systems and would allow for variable pricing options such as not double-charging vehicles that have already paid a toll within the past hour. These systems would have the ability to scan EZ Pass tags while vehicles are travelling at highway speeds. Similar technology is already in use at certain points on the NYS Thruway and can significantly reduce the long queues and wait times compared to traditional toll booths.

A large portion of the Move NY Fair Plan is devoted to how the City’s transportation infrastructure is currently financed. It has been widely reported that the National Highway Trust Fund has come close to insolvency in the past few years as the drop in fuel prices and total Vehicle Miles Traveled coupled with improved fuel efficiency have reduced revenue from gasoline taxes. It is also well known that direct aid from both the State and Federal governments has been sharply reduced over the past decade.

Move NY stresses the importance of finding new locally based revenue sources in an effort to be more self-reliant. The Plan projects that an additional $1.5 billion in net revenues will be
generated annually and offers a proposal for how the funds are distributed, with the goal to better coordinate the operations of the MTA with the City and State transportation departments into a coherent system rather than separate groups of facilities with different funding mechanisms. Presently there are great inconsistencies in the level of maintenance and general condition of the City-owned bridges, the NY State-owned bridges and MTA bridges.

**DRAWBACKS AND CONCERNS**

While there is much to like about the Move NY Fair Plan, there are a number of issues and potential problems:

- Sam Schwartz, PE is certainly to be commended for the concept and authoring the initial report, however remaining the Move NY namesake makes the plan difficult to be championed by political leaders who are needed to make the plan a reality.

- One of the inherent problems with establishing a boundary is that there will always be a neighborhood that lies just beyond the boundary. Will motorists park their cars just north of 60th street and change to a bus or subway with a lower fare than the toll? It seems unlikely that the inconvenience would be worth the savings for most people, but there is a very real concern that the streets in the low 60’s will receive an increase in through traffic as drivers make a special effort to stay outside the fare zone.

- The Plan states that congestion in the neighborhoods adjoining the free bridges has caused a higher rate of traffic collisions, often involving pedestrians. The Authors assert that relieving congestion will greatly reduce the number of incidents but are silent on recommending infrastructure improvements to support changes in travel patterns, speed and volumes.

- The system relies heavily on complicated and continually evolving technology. For instance, the system has to “know” that a particular vehicle paid a toll on the Triborough Bridge within the previous hour to qualify for a reduced toll at 60th Street. Such capability is not entirely new, similar systems have been deployed elsewhere, but such a system will come with high initial and long-term operational costs.

- The plan estimates that reducing vehicular trips into the Manhattan CBD will result in an increase of 115,000 daily visitors via mass transit. However, there is no indication as to whether the transit system can accommodate the additional ridership, or how to fund capacity improvements to support this sudden mode shift.

- Curiously, the Plan does not include the Hudson River crossings owned by the Port Authority. They are certainly among the options considered by motorists when “bridge shopping.”
The plan does not seek to address heavily congested neighborhoods in the other boroughs whose own CBDs suffer from varying degrees of congestion. It would be useful to examine the effects of instituting fare zones around multiple hubs and business districts beyond Manhattan.

The plan proposes the creation of a “Move NY Highway & Transit Authority” to be chartered as a public benefit corporation under the MTA. The stated purpose is to ensure that revenues are shared with the City and State transportation departments and create a “lockbox” of dedicated funds. While the objective is laudable it is highly questionable that the creation of another State authority is a positive step. Authorities in New York have a long history of high administrative costs and little accessibility or accountability to the public or even to State legislators.

Other issues of jurisdictional ownership and political control are missing despite being a real and potentially large hurdle towards adoption and implementation.

**METRO CHAPTER POSITION**

The Metro Chapter was generally in support of the 2008 Congestion Pricing plan and was disappointed in its defeat. The Chapter is once again supportive of the efforts to rationalize the disparate and sometimes illogical fare and toll policies and rectify the inequities. The Chapter believes the Move NY Fair Plan addresses some of the features of the earlier Plan that led to opposition. Any policy that raises fees on some and lowers them on others will have real or perceived “winners” and “losers”, but the Plan clearly aims to be as equitable as possible and to rectify the regressive nature of the current system.

As was described above, there are several flaws and omissions in the plan as well as substantial barriers to implementation. To overcome these shortcomings, the Metro Chapter would like to offer our expertise and resources to assist in refining the plan. The Chapter also calls on City and State elected officials to work collaboratively to consider the merits of the plan and to formulate the strategies for implementation. The City’s transportation infrastructure is vital to the economic health of our region, if not the nation. Creating a sustainable funding source is long overdue and the Move NY Fair Plan is much needed first step. It is clearly evident that a continuation of current policies will result in an ever growing funding gap and deteriorating infrastructure.