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Sunnyside Chamber Revisits Congestion Pricing Issue

BY THOMAS COGAN



(L. to r.); Angus Grieve-Smith, former Councilmember Walter McCaffrey, Sunnyside Chamber President, Ira Greenberg, Sunnyside Chamber Board Member Rebecca Barker, Dazies' owner Lily Gavin at the March luncheon meeting of the Sunnyside Chamber of Commerce at Dazies Restaurant.

Photo Luke Adams

Congestion pricing is back, or at least it was for the duration of the March luncheon meeting of the Sunnyside Chamber of Commerce. At Dazies Restaurant on Queens Boulevard, former Councilmember Walter McCaffrey and Woodside activist Angus Grieve-Smith debated the issue of whether or not to impose user fees on persons driving cars or trucks into Midtown Manhattan in an effort to relieve, or more efficiently control, traffic congestion. Grieve-Smith had an audio-visual presentation while McCaffrey simply spoke extemporaneously. The respective presentations got a lively response from the SCC luncheon audience. A few persons' tempers were raised, indicating that the congestion issue is not about to subside.

Grieve-Smith started by saying that according to polls taken, Queens remains in favor of congestion pricing or some means of addressing the problem of congestion, citing as evidence a 2008 Quinnipiac poll showing 60 percent of respondents in favor. He turned to a relatively small part of Queens, but one that he and his audience know well: Queens Boulevard, especially at the approach to the Queensboro Bridge. He said that for decades commuting by vehicle to and from Manhattan has been supported by the policy of getting vehicles over the bridge with all deliberate speed. Nearby, parallel routes Skillman Avenue and 43rd Avenue are one-way roads in opposite directions, dedicated to traffic relief during the morning and evening rush hours. But this grand plan has faults, Grieve-Smith said, the free ride over the bridge, for one, since the inevitable result is congestion, affecting buses. He said that in implementing tolls on the East River bridges, toll plazas and agents could be bypassed with current technology, in the form of a gate that could read EZ Passes and photograph licenses of those who try to get through without one. He said such a gate is in effect at Harriman, on the New York State Thruway. Through his

slide show, he postulated a day when Queens Boulevard had a more leisurely pace, when shopping along its course would be more feasible and desirable and such enhancements as widened sidewalks would be possible. He showed a model, the Boulevard August Blanqui in Paris. He also showed a model that existed only in the imagination: the new Queens Boulevard as envisioned in a Queens Chamber of Commerce publication in 1914.

McCaffrey reverted to the congestion pricing model brought up and rejected in 2008, scoffing at the contention that pricing would be “reasonably based” and reminding his listeners of the prices exacted at present on the toll bridges and tunnels. He said he had no faith in the concept of congestion pricing, saying the concept might be either good or bad but “the reality of specifics, not concepts” makes things work. The high price of getting into Manhattan by private transit would have a severe effect on seniors, who must resort to hospitals located there for health care and need private, rather than public transit to reach those places, he said. He further observed that interborough and intraborough traffic, between or within boroughs other than Manhattan, has become a great problem, yet it is something that congestion pricing, centered on Manhattan, does not address. He also said that it is a government program, which would suck in money but fail to use it appropriately. He was not, he asserted, making the transition from liberal Democrat to Tea Party stalwart but was simply unwilling to trust the Metropolitan Transportation Authority to handle money well, given its record. He thought a better means to a solution could be found in broad-based funding mechanisms.

Alex Marshall, a senior fellow at the Regional Plan Association and an author of books on urban life, felt the skepticism in the room and asked those in attendance to consider the history of the parking meter. It was first used in the 1930s and caught on immediately with urban officials, despite the shocked reaction of some who couldn't abide the thought of paying for a parking space. From Oklahoma City, where the first one appeared, it spread nationally in no time and, hated though it might have been since then, has had a controlling influence also. He said that few would disagree that traffic congestion in Manhattan as a result of influx from the other boroughs is quite bad. Therefore, he said, consider some pricing program to relieve it, even if it must be different from the plan or plans already proposed, because you must. Marc Levine, a Sunnyside attorney, said that Marshall's writings explain the way technology has improved many functions in urban life.

McCaffrey put forth some ideas about relieving congestion. Begin, he suggested, by cracking down on construction companies, whose projects all over Manhattan impede vehicles and pedestrians alike. He would fine heavily until extensive changes were effected and sidewalks and roadways were better cleared. Until they were, he said, fines of perhaps \$100,000 a day would be a fine way to make money. At one point, Grieve-Smith said he was not persuaded by some critics' assertion that congestion pricing would impinge on the working poor who had no choice but to drive to Manhattan; he said he knew of no working class person who drove there. That comment elicited groans and murmurs of disapproval. When Queens Chamber of Commerce Executive Vice President Jack Friedman disparaged Grieve-Smith's public transit hopes, the latter retorted that those opposed to congestion pricing should be fighting harder for public transit. Friedman said he has spent lots of time in Albany and been told until he was worn out that the state has no money for mass transit anywhere