

# Hey! Hey! I'm Walking Here! — How New York (and Other Big Cities) Should Solve the Traffic Problem

by Carolyn Curiel, an [Editorial Board](#) member, writes about local government, national trends and social issues.

If there's one thing New Yorkers, and people from the New York metropolitan area, like to talk about more than the weather, it's traffic. Traffic is the bane of workers, residents and visitors to the city.

New York traffic is slow. If you've ever walked four miles an hour on the treadmill — a pace that barely breaks a sweat for most people— you've matched or bettered typical speeds for vehicles navigating much of Manhattan. New York traffic is also costly. For business, and indeed for anyone who counts time lost as spent revenue, traffic congestion is a clear and present threat to the bottom line. It also spews pollution, wastes energy, and wears down already aging and battered streets. Worst of all, traffic congestion costs lives — primarily the lives of pedestrians and bicyclists.

Yet even as Mayor Michael Bloomberg has taken bold steps to improve the other dampers on the quality of life — like crime and smoking in public indoor spaces — he has done little about New York traffic.

There are a few simple steps New York should take. The city has too many cars, and not enough streets and roadways to put them on. There needs to be fewer cars and more cyclists, pedestrians, and mass-transit riders.

One bold way to make this happen is "[congestion pricing](#)," an approach that is being tried with success in other large cities around the world.

Congestion pricing systems impose a charge on cars and trucks that enter the most densely trafficked parts of cities. [London](#) and [Singapore](#) have had success with their versions and more recently a model was tested in [Stockholm](#).

Chicago and Paris have gone another route, concentrating on improving pedestrian walkways and cycling lanes, reducing car usage for short trips.

For New York, a city planned mostly on a grid and built to be walker-friendly, a combination of the two approaches might work. Several economic and business groups want a closer look at one congestion-pricing proposal, which would charge a fee to drivers in the central business district, the area below 60th Street in Manhattan.

As with most things involving transportation in and around the city, however, it's the getting there that is the biggest challenge. The politics of putting a price on anything that has been free poses a particularly onerous roadblock.

City leaders, who have been quietly but earnestly studying how to ensure New York's economic future, have not placed congestion pricing on their agenda. But that may have to change.

The city continues to grow, with its [population projected to reach nine million](#) in the next quarter century. New office towers being planned and built now put an even bigger burden on the city's badly overburdened streets. Now is the time to draw up a workable plan that prevents New York from being immobilized by its own spectacular success.

### **I. I'm Walking (or Pedaling or Driving or Skating) Here!**

Stand on any corner in Times Square — if you can find an unclaimed piece of pavement — and your senses quickly become as overloaded as the streets. There are few other places where so many objects compete so exquisitely just to move. Lanes are jammed with taxis, private automobiles and buses from all across the city and New Jersey. Delivery trucks barrel by. Bicyclists and drivers of pedi-cab (three-wheel cycles that carry passengers) bravely, sometimes brazenly, fight for their share of the street. The occasional skateboarder, rollerblader or scooter-rider zips through the mix.

Add in ambulances and fire trucks and the growing number of double-decker sight-seeing buses and novelty recreational rides, like the lane-wide, circular, seven-seater cycles that tourists seem to delight in, and the risks quickly multiply.

Pedestrians, meanwhile, frustrated that they cannot move down sidewalks clogged with guidebook-toting gawkers and vendors of everything from used books to t-shirts, turn the nearest lane of the street into a makeshift walkway.

This scene is not only chaotic — it's dangerous. The city has come a long, deadly way since the [first pedestrian was killed](#), by an electric taxicab, as he stepped off a street car on Central Park West in 1899. Last year more than 150 pedestrians and nearly two dozen cyclists died in traffic.

In recent years, pedestrians have been killed by [tour buses](#), [vans](#) and countless automobiles. [Transportation Alternatives](#), a non-profit organization promoting ways to get around without the automobile, keeps [a grim list of fatalities](#) — along with information on the dangers caused by S.U.V.'s, drivers talking on cell phones, and other particular menaces. The law is on the pedestrians' side. New York law requires drivers [to yield to pedestrians in crosswalks](#), even if they are not in the driver's lane. But you wouldn't know it standing at a typical New York crosswalk.

Of course, car drivers are not the only ones flouting the law. Cyclists fly through red lights, pedestrians jaywalk, scoffing at a turn-only signal as they cut off a chain of cars

and unregulated jitney buses at 42nd and 8th. A law of the urban jungle prevails, since drivers, cyclists and pedestrians know that their chances of being ticketed hover in the neighborhood of zero. Manhattan below 59th Street, encompassing Midtown and the Financial District, is the densest and most diverse part of this traffic soup. Some 840,000 vehicles enter the central business district daily. From a 6 a.m. pre-rush hour, when the surge begins to build, through morning, midday and evening rush hours, until dinnertime begins to thin traffic around 8 p.m., these motorists rule the streets. Traffic jams are at their worst in Manhattan, but they can extend for miles into the other boroughs, especially Brooklyn and Queens. For commuters from farther east or the west, a short drive can turn into an extended stay on the Long Island Expressway or in a Hudson River tunnel.

No part of the city is immune. In his last State of the City speech, Mayor Bloomberg singled out [the traffic problem in Staten Island](#) — where the roadways have become anything but bucolic. A half century ago, the borough was nearly rural, with fewer than 200,000 residents, but thanks in large measure to the building of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge in 1964, it has grown to nearly half a million. All but about 18 percent of the borough's households own cars. Mayor Bloomberg announced several traffic-easing initiatives last March, including reopening rail lines for freight, but Staten Island's traffic problem isn't going away. An [effort by NASCAR](#) to bring a car-racing franchise to the island is foundering on the fact that — ironically — Staten Island's roads cannot handle all the cars filled with people who would drive to see the car races.

The same seems to go for Queens, where just one-third of households are carless. In Queens, [the biggest problem is truck traffic](#), especially in Flushing, which has some of the worst truck congestion in the city. The city has come up with modest proposals so far, including limiting hours for truck deliveries and more clearly marking truck routes.

In the Bronx and Manhattan, where traffic tends to move slowest, and drivers are especially quick to slam down on the horn, [traffic noise](#) is an especially acute problem.

In Brooklyn, where a major residential, office and sports arena development is planned for the [Atlantic Yards](#) near downtown, a main complaint has been about adding to already backed-up traffic — much of it headed to Manhattan.

Across the city, car and truck exhaust is a major problem. In a [poll by the Tri-State Campaign](#), a nonprofit group, half of surveyed residents citywide cited concerns over pollution from traffic. They right to be concerned. Exhaust fumes, particularly from diesel fuel, contain pollutants and particulates that contribute to a wide variety of illnesses, including [asthma](#), and have been linked to lung and other cancers. The risk is especially serious for children.

There has to be a better way.

## **II. The Commuters' Lament**

The one truth that workers in the city know is that there are no secret routes or real short cuts to getting to their daily bread. Everyone else has thought of them, and those routes are crowded, too.

Some commuters have taken to setting out from home earlier and leaving work later, just to beat the crowds and shave a few minutes off their time in traffic.

But the only way to really beat the traffic may be to avoid it altogether — either by living within walking distance of work, or by telecommuting. Most people can't afford, or wouldn't want, to live where they work. And while more businesses are allowing telecommuting, it isn't an option for most employees. That means that most of us still have to get out of our pajamas and make our way to a workplace five days a week.

New Yorkers, though, commute differently than the rest of the country. Commuters in the New York metropolitan area represent about 40 percent of the nation's total public transit users, according to [the Census report](#). Nationally, almost 9 of 10 workers travel by private car. The average duration of a local commute, each way, is 34.2 minutes, about 9 minutes more than the national average, and the second longest in the nation. In a year, the average commuter here spends well over 100 hours in transit.

The time invested in commuting, daunting as it may already be, will surely expand, and soon. With median home prices in the metro area approaching \$400,000, and [median monthly rent](#) for a studio in Manhattan near \$2,000, the term "affordable housing" is fast becoming an oxymoron. For lower-wage workers, who face the severest housing crisis, the commute is especially painful.

We are living in the age of the extreme commute — those taking 90 minutes or longer each way — and it seems to be here for good. Census data show that some 18,000 workers in the region — many of them home health care and other service providers — make such commutes to jobs paying less than \$25,000 a year. But workers in all but perhaps the highest income levels are [finding residences farther away](#) from their jobs in the city.

Meanwhile, large, vertically ambitious office space development is being planned wherever there is a plot of land to be claimed, from the Atlantic Yards in Brooklyn to Lower Manhattan and the Hudson Yards west of Midtown. The stage is being set for new and larger streams of commuters to the city and there will be a need for transportation that can handle them.

The good news buried in New York's challenging commuting picture is that commuting statistics indicate a mindset open to reliance on public transit. That is true not only in the city, but in surrounding counties, where public transportation ridership has been steadily on the rise.

Any sane plan for handling commuting in the future will take advantage of New York area commuters' receptiveness to public transportation, and persuade as many as possible to abandon doing bumper-to-fender battle on their own.

### **III. The Case Against Cars**

Every day, 3.6 million people — half of them workers — pour into Manhattan south of 60th Street. People rightly complain most vehemently about trucks, which are the loudest, most menacing, and most exhaust-spewing traffic. Still, trucks account for just about 14 percent of the traffic. According to a [study this year by Bruce Schaller](#), a transportation consultant, 60 percent of the trips are made by personal autos, and most of these trips could have been accomplished by mass transit. That makes cars the heart of the problem.

Whether by design or not, the city enables many of these self-indulgent commuters. It has provided free parking — or inexpensive metered parking — on even the narrowest of streets. Even so, cars frequently double park or occupy loading zones for trucks, who then must block streets to do their jobs. Heftier charges for parking, and a new focus on parking enforcement would help discourage unnecessary driving, and ease the resulting bottlenecks.

New York should also rethink free parking. Much of the parking in the city is free, even for non-residents — which is not the case in many parts of the country, where residents get special parking permits. New York also hands out parking permits to many municipal employees which they use like entitled diplomats with immunity. Limiting such passes would immediately help to make streets passable, especially in Lower Manhattan, where many municipal offices are located.

The fact is, for many who drive into the city, the act has become an almost mindless choice. In the Schaller study, which was commissioned by Transportation Alternatives, fully 90 percent of commuters who drove were found to have access to public transportation. Without penalty, drivers need only consider the personal cost they incur — for parking, the rare toll and gasoline. Even at \$3 a gallon, convenience and comfort may seem a fair tradeoff for many motorists. Some who own mileage-efficient or hybrid vehicles may even convince themselves that they are being responsible.

But as every car contributes to the problem, every car removed can add to the solution. The Partnership for New York City, a leading business group, is conducting its own study on the expense of congestion. But a [three-year-old mobility report from Texas Transportation Institute](#), which examined national traffic trends, already offers compelling reasons for economic concern. It found serious traffic in New York for 70 percent of trips during peak hours; 200 million gallons of wasted fuel, and the spewing of 166,000 tons of airborne pollutants. The price for the time lost was significant: the congestion cost each commuter \$670 annually and resulted in some \$6.8 billion in lost productivity. Unsurprisingly, it turns out choking on fumes and being stuck in traffic isn't a good deal for anyone.

#### IV. Keeping New York on the Move

New York's approach to transportation — like most cities — has been described as first making sure that "all the cars are happy." That should change.

The priority should be making sure that New Yorkers, and the people who spend their days here, have a safe, clean, and efficient environment for going about their business and recreation. If that means burdening cars, that's what should be done.

Transportation Alternatives has set out an array of very sensible suggestions, many of which come under the rubric of what it calls "[traffic calming](#)."

Among the proposals: longer walking signals, speed bumps along pedestrian crossings and jay-walking barriers.

These changes were implemented on Queens Boulevard, and dramatically improved conditions on a road that was notorious as the "[Boulevard of Death](#)." Before the changes, an average of 10 pedestrians a year were killed trying to cross the road. Fatalities now are rare.

As for cyclists, danger could be reduced with more dedicated bicycle lanes and stricter enforcement of traffic laws — speeding taxis and trucks are an urban cyclist's worst enemy.

The city could also do cyclists a favor by cracking down on the [scofflaws among their ranks](#). It has been suggested that cyclists be required to get licenses, like automobile drivers. That might not be necessary (although it would ensure, at the very least, that cyclists learn basic safety rules), but sloppy or overly aggressive cycling is a hazard waiting for a crackdown. Bicycle riders who weave through traffic and race through red lights are endangering themselves (as well as pedestrians and automobile drivers and passengers.)

The larger goal, though, has to be developing and implementing a congestion-busting plan that gets as many vehicles as possible off the streets.

The long-sought [Cross Harbor Rail Freight Tunnel](#), which would bring goods to the city by freight rail could take many trucks off the streets.

Improved, and better funded, public transit, could convince more drivers to abandon their cars. There need to be better rapid bus lines, increased subway and commuter rail capacity and smarter use of the great resource surrounding the city: waterways. While Staten Islanders enjoy free ferry service to Lower Manhattan, they are alone in being so coddled. Ferry service across the region needs should be expanded and subsidized.

The boldest step of all would be imposing serious fees on people who bring cars into the bottom third of Manhattan. Elected leaders seem to equate uttering the word "toll" with

saying Rumpelstiltskin. In addition to the wrath they incur with drivers who vote, and garage owners who covet the business that comes with traffic, [tolls have a history](#) that seems to warn off even the brave. Mayor John Lindsay wanted to ban traffic in parts of Midtown in 1971. Two years later Governor Nelson Rockefeller proposed East River Bridge tolls. As concern over traffic congestion and air quality mounted, Mayor Ed Koch further pressed for bridge tolls in 1986. Then consideration of tolls took a fiscal turn. Mayor David Dinkins, grasping at every way to pull the city out of financial crisis, looked to toll the bridges. Mayor Bloomberg hoped for the same as he faced a multibillion-dollar budget gap in 2002.

All of these efforts, one after the other, were abandoned, for a variety of reasons: political heat mounted, federal air standards were eased or other economic solutions were found. Tolls may not be good politics, and they may not even be especially powerful revenue generators. But as traffic managers, they merit a hard look.

That is also the main rationale for charging a fee to enter the most traffic-jammed streets.

The congestion pricing model most cited is London, which charges \$14 to most drivers on its busiest streets. The British did not rush their plan. Before the charge took effect, they built up public transportation and continue to do so, using money collected from the surcharge. Drivers are charged by the day, with cameras capturing license plate numbers for billing. Under the plan, traffic is down more than 20 percent and moves 37 percent faster.

Sweden tried a more flexible and variable plan in Stockholm, with charges based on time of day and sector. Initial reports are promising and the city will decide whether to keep the system in a referendum later this month (September 17). Whether it could be made palatable in New York, though, is a looming question. Before then, there is bound to be a lot of kicking and screaming.

One study, produced by [the chamber of commerce in car-happy Queens](#), concluded that congestion pricing is a financial loser that would cost the city \$2.7 billion in economic activity. Others have charged that it would finally and utterly hand Manhattan to the very rich, and might hurt Broadway theaters and other nightlife. Of course, any pricing scheme could limit the hit, by adjusting fees by time of day and location.

The Bloomberg administration, which did a brilliant job in selling the smoking ban as the cure for an occupational health hazard, could certainly justify congestion pricing in some form as a health issue — curbing emissions to lengthen and strengthen lives. There are questions about whether the city even has the jurisdiction to collect a road fee. Most issues of taxation and transportation fall to the state. But with the winds of change sweeping through Albany this year, this is as auspicious a time as any to get the city the authority it needs.

Clearly, New York needs a traffic strategy.

The Bloomberg administration should listen to the ideas being generated by the [Citywide Coalition for Traffic Relief](#), which includes Transportation Alternatives, Citizens for NYC, NYPIRG Straphangers Campaign and the Tri-State Transportation Campaign. The coalition has been working for the last year to garner broad support from community organizations for several reasonable measures that could get things rolling.

It [recommends](#) cleaner and more frequent subway trains, stepped up plans for rapid bus transit, and more and better lanes for cyclists and pedestrians. In addition, it proposes the city work harder to enforce truck rules and routes and expand "traffic calming" measures, including restricted turning and lower residential street speeds. It also calls on the city to make parking more of a luxury by pricing it at Midtown rates in commercial districts throughout the five boroughs.

The coalition also urges the city to begin studying congestion pricing, which, if adopted, could change the face of New York City for years to come.

Mayor Bloomberg has made it clear that he wants to leave a big mark on the city before his second term is over. He has tended to think about a legacy with bold building projects, like the proposed West Side Stadium. By coming up with a bold plan for changing traffic patterns in New York, he could make the city safer, cleaner, and more livable — and New Yorkers would be thanking him for many years to come.

Lela Moore contributed research for this article.