

D. Weprin, Lancman Trash 'Congest'

City Councilmember David Weprin, council Finance Committee chairman, whose district is out in Eastern Queens, has been steadily bashing the mayor's plan, charging it's unfair to many of his constituents who must use their cars to drive into Manhattan because there's no mass transportation in existence that they can use as an alternative means of commuting.

Weprin, speaking as a representative of an outer borough district as well as Council Finance Committee chairman, said he opposed the mayor's controversial plan. "Commuters, small businesses and working class families across the city would be adversely affected by the levying of a congestion pricing tax," he said.

Besides that, he said residents of areas like his Eastern Queens district have very limited access to public transportation and have to rely on their cars to get into Manhattan would unfairly suffer from a congestion tax.

Lancman (D-Flushing) challenged the mayor on how the plan would affect Queens and questioned who would have the authority to operate the plan once the three-year pilot program proposed by the mayor expired.

Like Weprin and others, he said the mayor's plan forces commuters to use mass transit when the mass transit system in Queens is completely inadequate.

Lancman emphasized, "The need [is] to improve mass transit in Queens so that we have a reliable, efficient way to commute into Manhattan before the city tries to squeeze people out of their cars through a \$170 per month driving tax."

Lancman, also pointed out that Queens will receive only \$1 billion of the total \$50 billion in mass transit improvements which the congestion tax would help fund, and that these projects wouldn't be completed until several years from now.

Another criticism made by Lancman was that under his proposal, the mayor alone would be authorized to continue or discontinue the plan after three years.

Weprin (D-Hollis), citing the high cost of the plan (\$2,000-a-year for his constituents), said it would be even worse for small businesses that employ trucks to ship their products into Manhattan. He said the suggested fee for them would be set at over \$5,000 a year.

"Regardless of what argument you hear out of the administration about the necessity of implementing a congestion pricing scheme, it is a tax and it is a tax being devised on those who can least afford it during a time when the city is enjoying a \$5 billion surplus," he said.

He reiterated, "Traffic congestion is a problem that needs to be addressed, but other alternatives should be studied before we punish commuters who live in the outer boroughs."

CUOMO CAMPAIGN'S BONUS FOR STUDENTS: State Attorney General Andrew Cuomo has done an excellent job exposing the self serving student loan scandal

that has involved many colleges and universities, along with banks concerning the hugely lucrative student loan program.

Now Congress is picking up on Cuomo's disclosures to enact changes in the program that are very favorable to students and which we're sure the AG will approve.

Last week, the House education committee voted 30 to 16 to cut subsidies to lenders in the program by \$19 billion and to lower the interest rates on a key student loan program for the next five years.

Meanwhile, the Senate education committee will take up its own bill next week and reportedly will cut subsidies to lenders more than the house did.

Getting back to the proposed benefits for students, the House bill raises the maximum Pell grants for low- and moderate-income students over the next five years to \$5,200 from the current \$4,700.

The measure also relaxes the repayment terms for student borrowers by lowering the maximum a graduate must make in loan payments to 15 percent of income, rather than the current 20 percent.

The lower interest rate, which would apply to need-based student loans and which had already been approved by the House shortly after the Democrat-controlled House was sworn in last January, will be extended as in another way. Under the committee's approved bill, the interest rate on loans will be reduced from 6.8 percent to 4.3 percent for a year instead of the present six months.

The student benefits provided in the pending legislation will be paid for by the \$19 billion in cuts to lenders.

BLOOMBERG AND BRUNO PULLING TOGETHER ON 'CONGESTION' PLAN: What a difference 18 months has made in Mayor Michael Bloomberg's relations with state Senate Republicans.

At the beginning of the 2006 session, the billionaire mayor was waging an open war against the GOP'ers in the senate, threatening to put some of his money into trying to defeat some of their re-election campaigns because they didn't support his proposals to provide huge amounts of funding for New York City schools.

After some harsh words were exchanged publicly, Senate Majority Leader Joseph Bruno negotiated a peace pact under which the mayor pulled back the cash he had intended to use to oppose re-election of some senators and Bruno supported lavish plans to fund the city school system.

In contrast, at this moment the issue of greatest importance to Bloomberg is congestion pricing, charging motorists and trucking companies respectively between \$8 and \$21 a day to drive below 86th Street in Manhattan between 6 a.m. and 6 p.m. on weekdays. The plan is intended to reduce the number of vehicles driven in Manhattan and thus reduce air pollution, with the collected cash going to mass transit improvements.

Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver has been cool to the plan and has had several Assembly committees holding hearings on

the proposal to counter Bloomberg's efforts to get it approved and also get federal funding for it before a deadline is reached next month.

However, the Republican state senate has introduced a bill to make the mayor's plan happen and, although there's not unanimity among Bruno's members, the leader can provide enough votes that would be added to Democratic yeas to get the bill approved.

Stories out of Albany said the Republicans' motivation in pushing the mayor's plan arises from the party's counting on hefty campaign contributions from the billionaire mayor to hold on to its two-seat edge over Democrats in the senate.

Another source said the Republicans' strategy in having the congestion pricing bill on the floor was "an appeasement to the mayor, who has been one of their largest campaign contributors".

The Republicans may or may not get a chance to vote on the bill before the legisla-

ture adjourns the present session tomorrow or Friday.

The senate vote is not crucial, of course, because Silver and his Assembly members are still considering various aspects of the plan and won't be voting on it for a while yet—if ever.

Governor Eliot Spitzer, who supports the concept behind the mayor's bill, said on Monday that there is a mid- to late July deadline for securing the huge federal grant for the mayor's plan, so the legislature can come back and deal with it again by then.

Another report out of Albany said Silver and Bruno acknowledged the legislature would have to reconvene before August 1 to consider congestion pricing in Manhattan.

Whatever the plan's fate in the near future is, the mayor can rest assured he has a friend in Bruno and the Republicans. Both sides have come a long way since early last year.

Giuliani Airs 12-Point Platform

BY JOHN TOSCANO

Declaring "These are the 12 things that I believe will change the way we look at this campaign," Republican presidential candidate Rudy Giuliani last week laid out a mission of reform and change "which will take this country back to the 1990s".

Included among the items he ticked off before a town hall meeting in New Hampshire, the first-in-the-nation primary state, were a promise to keep America on the offensive in the anti-terror war, to end illegal immigration, to give Americans more control over health care and to cut taxes and cut "wasteful" Washington spending.

The promises were made as a Los Angeles poll found unannounced candidate Fred Thompson creeping up on New York's ex-mayor.

The *Los Angeles Times*/Bloomberg poll also found United States Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton still comfortably leading the Democratic pack of candidates.

Giuliani led Thompson by 27 to 21 percent with U.S. Senator John McCain dropping from second to third place with 12 percent and former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney at 10 percent.

Among the Dems, Clinton led by 33 percent, Illinois Senator Barack Obama had 22 percent, former Vice President Al Gore scored 15 percent, even though he's unannounced or not running, and former North Carolina Senator John Edwards trailed with 8 percent.

The results of the poll were in line with the *L.A. Times*/Bloomberg survey in April.

Another plus for frontrunner Clinton last week was a key endorsement from movie mogul and prize-winning director Steven Spielberg. The endorsement was a significant victory for Clinton in her War to Win the West against Obama. The latter had made inroads against Clinton when he opened his campaign, but Spielberg's move allowed Clinton to regain her luster in the Hollywood front.

In New Hampshire, Giuliani was in a feisty mood as he declared, "We are going to lay out a vision of doing what other people think is impossible."

It appeared that, although his frontrunner status has not been challenged or disturbed, he was turning the campaign up a notch to make sure none of his opponents would get any traction against him.

The entire list of commitments are as follows:

1. I will keep America on offense in the terrorists' war on us.
2. I will end illegal immigration, secure our borders and identify every noncitizen in our nation.
3. I will restore fiscal discipline and cut wasteful Washington spending.
4. I will cut taxes and reform the tax code.
5. I will impose accountability on Washington.
6. I will lead America toward energy independence.
7. I will give Americans more control over, and access to, health care with affordable and portable free-market solutions.
8. I will increase adoptions, decrease abortions and protect the quality of life for our children.
9. I will reform the legal system and appoint strict constructionist judges.
10. I will ensure that every community in America is prepared for terrorist attacks and natural disasters.
11. I will provide access to a quality education to every child in America by giving real school choice to parents.
12. I will expand America's involvement in the global economy and strengthen our reputation around the world.

