TESTIMONY BY NYC COUNCIL MAJORITY WHIP
SELVENA N. BROOKS-POWERS,
CHAIR TO THE COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE SUBMITTED ON AUGUST 31, 2022

Good morning. I am Councilwoman Selvena Brooks-Powers, representing Southeast Queens and eastern Rockaway in the New York City Council, and serving as Chair of the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure.

I’d like to thank the agency for hosting this forum for New Yorkers to share their perspectives on how congestion pricing will affect their communities. This proposal stands to significantly impact the fabric of our City, by reducing traffic in Manhattan’s urban core, and by establishing a new funding stream for our public transportation network and the many critical improvements necessary. We have a real opportunity to ensure that our subways, buses and commuter rail systems continue to meet the needs of everyone who lives, works and plays in the New York region.

But this must be done right, and done equitably. The MTA has released a wide-ranging set of proposals, with toll levels rising as high as twenty-three dollars. I have been stopped at events across the city, emailed, called with very valuable feedback on the Congestion Pricing plan with concerns of the impact to communities like the one I represent. I believe it is critical that outer-borough communities like mine, as well as Staten Island, South Bronx, and Western Queens, are not unjustly affected by the financial and potentially the environmental burden this toll may impose.

As the Chair of the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, and as a Council member whose constituents have some of the longest commutes in the City, I know firsthand that many residents in transportation deserts rely on our cars as a key part of their commute. Our communities lack viable public transportation services to effectively, safely, and reliably travel into Manhattan. I have many constituents who are seniors, as well as people in need of medical care only available in Manhattan. When, for them, the only way to access vital services is by car, an overly expensive toll will present a real financial burden to our seniors and disabled communities that live on fixed incomes.

Additionally, we need to be sure that our existing infrastructure can accommodate new commuting preferences. My district has three Long Island Rail Road stations; The MTA should consider expanding intra-city LIRR fare discounts to make commuter rail an
affordable option for more New Yorkers. I also want to make sure that as commuter demand shifts from cars to commuter rail, our stations do not experience crowding, overwhelmed parking lots and less reliable service.

I have also heard serious concerns from taxi drivers about this proposal. Our network of taxicab, livery, and rideshare vehicles fill key transportation gaps in many communities, and these drivers have already faced serious economic burdens in recent years and already pay a congestion surcharge on trips below 96th Street. We need to consider the vital contributions these drivers make to our network and set tolls accordingly.

And on behalf of my colleagues in the Bronx, like Deputy Speaker Diana Ayala and Council Member Rafael Salamanca, I’m worried this program will increase existing health disparities, including high rates of asthma and hypertension, that may result from increased truck traffic diverted to the borough’s roadways.

As the MTA continues evaluating their proposed alternatives, I hope that the agency takes these concerns seriously, and works to identify a proposal that alleviates our City’s traffic congestion without imposing harsh penalties on those who can least afford it.

And, as I close, I believe there remains a lot of critical questions that must be addressed before a full implementation of this proposal. We cannot continue a system that generates revenue on the back of low-income and marginalized communities; nor can we create a system that could potentially segregate groups of New Yorkers from accessing below 60th Street. As Chair, I am fully committed to working with the MTA and other key stakeholders, but I implore the MTA to map out a plan that will ensure we are not locking out marginalized communities.

I appreciate the opportunity to testify.

Thank you.