



Legislature's dithering pushes \$13 toll on the Verrazano closer to grim reality

By Robert McCormick

March 26, 2009, 9:38PM



William McCann/MTA Bridges & Tunnels

The Verrazano-Narrows Bridge is a cash cow for the Metropolitan Transportation Authority.

Staten Islanders will have to swallow a \$13 cash toll on the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, while drivers in the rest of the city will keep their free ride on the East and Harlem River crossings, if legislative inertia continues to propel the MTA to enact its "Doomsday" budget.

The MTA board approved a 25 to 30 percent fare and toll hike this week, with the Verrazano and other MTA bridges set to go up in July, unless the state Legislature can devise alternate revenue streams to plug a \$1.2 billion budget gap. Talks involving a bailout that would entail a payroll tax and tolling the currently free bridges have stalled in the state Senate.

"It ought to be one city and one standard," said Allen Cappelli, the borough's representative to the MTA board. "Either we shouldn't have to pay, or everybody else should have to pay."

If the Legislature can quickly agree on a new funding source for the MTA, some if not all of the hikes, service cuts and layoffs can be averted.

Meanwhile, toll booths at all four Staten Island bridges already collect more than 6 percent of the nation's tolls, according to Dr. Jonathan Peters, a finance professor and transportation expert at the College of Staten Island, who has done extensive research on the subject. Toll collection from passenger cars alone coming from only Staten Island ZIP codes accounts for about \$65 million in revenue per year at the Verrazano, Peters said.

And without movement from Albany to balance that inequity, Islanders will continue to bear a growing toll burden, despite extremely limited transit options to travel off the Island without a car.

Staten Islanders get a hefty discount on the Verrazano toll with resident E-ZPass rates of \$4.98, going up to \$6.30, and a resident carpool discount of \$2.33, going up to \$2.95. But for residents who don't have E-

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ZPass, or who haven't signed up for any of the discount programs, and for residents of Brooklyn and elsewhere who commute into Staten Island, the \$13 levy has been described by many with one word -- "obscene."

CSI students who commute from Brooklyn and other parts of the city and who do not have E-ZPass will be hit with the full \$13 cash Verrazano toll and could easily tack on nearly \$1,200 per school year in commuting costs, Peters said. The high toll also deters companies from other boroughs from doing business here, he said.

Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver had proposed a compromise that would toll the East and Harlem river bridges at just \$2, or the same rate as a subway ride, but still the measure failed in the Senate.

"Apparently that was politically difficult, yet somehow \$13 was acceptable," Peters said.

State Sen. Andrew Lanza said he is in favor of tolling the free bridges, but won't support the payroll tax.

"As a Staten Islander, I say go ahead. If you're going to toll our bridge, toll their bridges so we can pay less on the Verrazano Bridge. I'm all for fairness."

Borough President James Molinaro also supports spreading out the bridge toll pain. "It is high time the surrounding communities start to shoulder some of the burden," Molinaro wrote in a letter to MTA Executive Director and CEO Elliot G. Sander.

Sen. Diane Savino has said she opposes tolling the free bridges but will fight to get a credit for Staten Islanders if the tolls are implemented.

Islanders will also face the elimination of weekend service on the S42, 54, 57, 60 and 76 bus routes and reduction of operating hours on weekdays for the S54, 57, 60 and 66 routes.

"I'm sick of Staten Islanders having to foot the bill and not getting anything in return," Lanza said, calling the MTA's toll hike plan "highway robbery."

"It's a disparate treatment that needs to be recognized." Every driver should have to pay one toll, Cappelli said. "That seems like a fair solution under these circumstances."

-- *Contributed by Maura Yates*

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