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VIEWPOINTS

Giuliani Puts Brakes on Car Culture

By Charles Komanoff

RUDY GIULIANI has had a lot of surprises for us in recent days. His ban on solo car commuting represents a particularly bold break with conventional thinking about the place of automobiles in New York City.

Banning single-occupant vehicles from lower and mid-Manhattan crossings was visionary. The mayor has done more than ease the current traffic crunch; he has pointed the way to curing our region's chronic traffic congestion, once and for all.

With one stroke, Giuliani has eliminated gridlock's No. 1 culprit: the single-occupant vehicle.

It wasn't easy. The "right to drive" — anywhere, anytime — is ingrained in contemporary culture. In life's frantic scramble and struggle, a vehicle of one's own has come to be seen not as an indulgence but a refuge; not as a luxury but a necessary convenience.

But with more and more cars on the road, "convenience" has lengthened from minutes to hours, making solo commuting very inconvenient — indeed, a luxury we cannot afford to provide.

The numbers make this clear.

Single-occupant vehicles make up more than half of Manhattan-bound morning traffic but they transport fewer than a third of all highway commuters. In other words, a minority of solo drivers is taking up an absolute majority of road space.

The resulting congestion ensnares everyone from car-poolers and bus riders to the solo drivers themselves. Vans carrying tradespeople and trucks laden with goods the city needs to keep its economy going have been especially hard hit.

Think of all eight crossings into Manhattan as a 20-lane highway. Single-occupant vehicles, accounting for 53 percent of traffic, occupy 11 lanes but they deliver only 30 percent of commuters — just six lanes' worth.

That's five lanes wasted by solo drivers — the equivalent, say, of closing both the Queens Midtown Tunnel and the Brooklyn Bridge. Radio traffic reports call it "congestion," but it's really just inefficiency.

Following the Sept. 11 terrorism attacks, road closures and police searches constricted highway capacity as never before. Under these circumstances, the wastefulness of solo driving became untenable.

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A ban on driving solo into Manhattan could lighten traffic.

There is one thing about Rudy Giuliani that his harshest critics would concede: He isn't afraid to act. And act he did. By sacrificing the luxury of solo driving, he enabled the people and firms that really needed to make it across — needed it enough to double up or take transit — to do so.

Despite dire headlines and indignant protests, the mayor's bold stroke seems to have been accepted. And it is working. Traffic tie-ups eased not just on Thursday, a Jewish holiday, but Friday as well, prompting the mayor to extend the ban into this week.

Eventually, one hopes, the police checks will lessen, in effect restoring missing road capacity. What should Giuliani or the next mayor do?

Three things.

First, don't go back to the status quo. Keep the car-pool rule. All the evidence indicates that keeping single-occupant vehicles off the roads during busy times of day will benefit many more people through time savings and travel predictability than it will inconvenience.

The details may need tinkering, but the basic policy is sound under "normal" conditions as well as in emergencies.

Second, upgrade the alternatives. For starters: simple and flexible car-pooling via real-time computer matching; universal van and bus service within a short walk of home; more off-peak train and subway service; bikeable routes to train stations and between towns.

For the long haul, we'll need to build new strategic rail lines and connectors, such as the Second Avenue Subway and an East-Side terminal for the Long Island Rail Road.

Third, start the transition to variable, non-stop tolling on all city bridges, tunnels and highways.

It will take some study and experimentation to establish the exact shape of such a system. But we know that road pricing is the ultimate gridlock-buster. After the Port Authority switched its Hudson River crossings to time-of-day pricing, a significant number of trips moved out of the peak hours. And tolls can be collected electronically, without slowing cars — indeed, without toll plazas altogether.

Road pricing is also a way — perhaps the only way — to finance the ambitious new rail and road infrastructure for making commuting easier and better.

Mayor Giuliani has been clear-sighted and brave enough to do the right thing.

Now it's up to us to build on his vision.

Charles Komanoff is a trustee of the Tri-State Transportation Campaign, a non-profit group.

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