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Lone-Driver Limits Meet Mostly Road Resignation

Many Commuters Say Sacrifice Makes Sense

By RANDY KENNEDY

Some compared it to sneaking totalitarianism, and they asked what other unalienable rights would soon disappear. Others were not quite so upset. They simply compared it to martial law.

"Can he really do that?" asked Tawana Brackett, gassing up her car in Brooklyn yesterday morning. "Who says he can do that?"

They were not talking about wiretaps or arbitrary arrest or the erosion of the rule of law in America in the wake of the World Trade Center attack. But what they were talking about was something that seems just as fundamental to many New Yorkers: the right to drive their cars anywhere they want.

And a day after Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani announced that the city would try, for the first time in 21 years, to tame traffic by prohibiting single-occupant cars from crossing into Midtown and Lower Manhattan, drivers around the city found it hard to believe that this automotive right was, in fact, just a privilege that could be curtailed. Many said it was a sacrifice they were prepared to make, and they thought it made sense. But many others were in a state of shock, mingled at first with defiance and then confusion.

"Are they going to make you pick up strangers in your car?" asked Ms. Brackett, a manager at a women's shelter who sometimes drives into Manhattan alone for business. "If they do that, it's going to be dangerous. I mean, you don't know who's out there. It could be a criminal or a terrorist you're picking up."

While Mr. Giuliani did say yesterday evening that it would be neighborly for drivers to offer others rides, city officials assured drivers that no one would be required to start picking up hitchhikers.

But they acknowledged that the decision to stress car-pooling and impose the ban during weekday mornings, from 6 a.m. to noon, was a drastic step that would pose huge logistical problems.

The ban will apply today and Friday and will cover most crossings south of 62nd Street — the Brooklyn, Manhattan, Williamsburg and Queensboro Bridges and the Queens-Midtown Tunnel. The ban will apply to the Lincoln Tunnel on Friday.

City officials said the ban was necessary because strict security checks of trucks, vans and buses at nearly all crossings into the city are not likely to decrease for weeks or maybe even months. And unless traffic policies are made much stricter to force more people to use mass transit, business around the region will suffer because of gridlock. "I have to urge everyone as strongly as I possibly can to take public transportation," Mr. Giuliani said.

But if the goal is to remake New Yorkers' travel habits, at least for a while, interviews on roads around the city yesterday suggested that it will not be easy to persuade people who have not used mass transit in years to get out of their cars.

"If they really want people to take the subway," said Henry Wade, a retired custodial foreman, "then they are going to have to make the subways better. They're going to have to get more trains. Have you been down in the subway at 8 a.m.? It's so tight you can't breathe. Some people are never going to go through that."

Not that the highways have been any less packed since Sept. 11. Yesterday's rush hours ended sooner and created much smaller traffic jams than those that tied up most of the region on Tuesday. But traffic in many parts of the city was still bad, and Mr. Wade himself admitted that he had tried to take his car into Manhattan and failed.

"I'm going back home and go to sleep," he said, sipping a cup of coffee at the corner of Tillary Street and Flatbush Avenue in downtown Brooklyn and considering his options. "I'll try later."

City officials said they hoped that announcing the ban on driver-only cars, like Mr. Wade's 1993 Lincoln yesterday, would in itself cause a huge drop in the number of cars on the road — about 65 percent of which, below 92nd Street in Manhattan on weekdays, are thought by traffic planners to be single-occupant cars.

At the crossings affected by the ban, checkpoints much the same as the security checkpoints will be set up near the bridge and tunnel entrances, Mr. Giuliani said, and cars not carrying passengers will be taken out of traffic and turned around.

Single-occupant cars already in Manhattan will not be stopped. The only kinds of vehicles that will be allowed to cross onto the island are those with commercial, government or taxi license plates, those carrying emergency or medical personnel or those with special parking permits

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for the disabled. Mayor Giuliani said that the effects of the ban would be monitored, and if it helped to ease traffic, it could be continued through next week or even longer.

Although many drivers had trouble comprehending the news, they said they would find other ways to get into Manhattan or give friends rides to assist in what they see as a kind of common cause.

Dennis Gonzalez, a bus driver with a broken foot, said that it was hard for him to use the subway but that he understood. "You can't do everything you want anymore," he said.

But others, while saying they understood, added that they had little choice and would find some way get their cars into the city. "My car is basically my office," said Maria Dapontes-Dougherty, a saleswoman for a wine distributor, who plies Manhattan streets all day with a car full of samples and sales materials.

"I can't carry all that around on the subway," she said, adding: "It has started to scare me that the terrorists seemed to be doing what they set out to do: ruining the way this city does business."

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