

Cuomo plan faces LI hurdles

Local senators take issue with commuter fees

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ALBANY — A growing rift between the Democratic Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo and the Senate's new Democratic majority is the backdrop for a fight over whether thousands of commuters from Long Island and Queens will be double charged under a plan to reduce traffic congestion in Manhattan.

Senate Majority Leader Andrea-Stewart Cousins said the Democratic majority, pushed by their more moderate suburban members on Long Island and Westchester, couldn't support Cuomo's congestion pricing as it is. "I look forward to working with my Long Island Delegation to ensure that the needs of Long Island are met," said Stewart-Cousins, a Westchester County Democrat.

Also playing a role in this argument is the dispute between Cuomo and the Senate majority over the collapse of the \$3 billion Amazon headquarters project in Queens and the 25,000 jobs that would go with it. Cuomo has publicly blamed Democratic senators from Long Island for failing to quell opposition by progressive, urban Democrats.

Now, the moderate suburban senators — who are most vulnerable in elections because they represent districts with large Republican blocs — need a win, political analysts say, but that would require Cuomo to bend on congestion pricing.

The issue is the part of Cuomo's budget proposal that would require Long Island and Queens commuters who take the Robert F. Kennedy Bridge and drive into the congestion pricing zone below 60th Street to pay both the RFK toll and the congestion pricing fee. The congestion pricing fee would be used to fund the city's subway repairs and improvements. Under the budget, commuters on other bridges and tunnels would get credits to avoid the double charges.

'Totally unfair'

"That's totally unfair," said Sen. James Gaughran (D-Huntington). "I would often take the



The proposed congestion pricing plan is for vehicles entering Manhattan south of 60th Street.

RFK Bridge, I know a lot of my constituents do. It's something we all need to address here."

Cuomo had worked out his plan to reduce Manhattan traffic and fund subway repairs without approval or input from the Legislature, which rankled legislators. Last week, Mayor Bill de Blasio joined Cuomo in supporting a slightly modified version of the proposal, again without the Legislature's input.

Soon after, Senate Democrats from Long Island criticized Cuomo's decision to not to provide credits to thousands of commuters from Long Island and Queens who take the RFK Bridge.

They are also concerned about another aspect of Cuomo's deal with de Blasio. It would make city subways a priority for spending Metropolitan Transportation Authority capital funds. MTA capital funds are also supposed to address concerns in the Long Island Rail Road and the Metro North Rail Road in Westchester.

With less than a month before the state budget is due,

Cuomo faces a quandary, political observers said. He could placate senators representing Long Island and Queens by providing credits for their commuters on the RFK Bridge and eliminate or reduce the "priority" for capital funds to go to city suburbs. But that could be counter to Cuomo's whole idea of reducing traffic in Manhattan and raising revenue for subway work, while conflicting with his deal with de Blasio. The mayor, like Cuomo, is being pressed to fix the subways fast in what is a growing political liability.

"Political deals are emerging as a substitute for a policy discussion," said Richard Brodsky, who teaches at New York University's Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service and is a former Democratic Assembly member from Westchester County. "It's, 'What do I need to get support from this guy?' not, 'How do I make this system work?'"

The governor said congestion pricing is needed to bolster declining state revenues, which amounted to more than

\$2 billion less than projected for December alone.

Details unknown for now

Cuomo said many of the details — including how much bridge and tunnel fares might increase and how much congestion pricing fees would be — won't be available before the Legislature must approve the plan. Cuomo said the MTA first needs to overhaul its management, cut waste, and hire outside experts to develop "a real capital plan." Tolls will be based on that calculation, which is likely months away, Cuomo said last week.

"Congestion is a problem in Manhattan," Cuomo said. "The environment is decaying around us and we need a mass transit system."

Although legislators said they need more details on Cuomo's plan, and the likely tolls and fares it would include, no public hearings or debates are scheduled. Major items like this in the budget are traditionally hammered out in closed-door negotiations and private legislative

briefings. Some legislators want the issue tabled until after the budget for a full discussion, but Cuomo prefers to link big policy issues to the budget negotiations where, under law, a governor has far more leverage over the Legislature.

Under state law, he can reject any tinkering by the Legislature to his budget proposals. In addition, if no budget deal is struck by the April 1 deadline, Cuomo could impose his budget and his congestion pricing plan, leaving the Legislature with the politically risky gambit of a government shutdown.

"Given the governor's absolute control of budget policy language, he will decide whether the disparate and discriminatory policies survive," Brodsky said.

This year, there's more at stake.

If the budget is late, legislators could lose the second-year bump in the raises approved in December by a special commission. That would cost legislators a \$10,000 raise.

"My conference is largely supportive of congestion pricing, but there are issues, there are questions," said Stewart-Cousins, the Senate leader. "We're going to certainly fight to make sure those concerns are addressed."

"We just want to make sure one kind of commuter isn't being treated differently than other commuters," said Sen. Todd Kaminsky (D-Long Beach).

Cuomo emphasizes that fewer than 2 percent of Long Island commuters drive into the congestion pricing zone now, according to Census reports.

"So, we are not talking about a lot of poor people being hit with a life-changing amount of additional fees," said Lawrence Levy, executive dean of Hofstra University's National Center for Suburban Studies. "But these communities are disproportionately from a handful of Senate and Assembly districts where their representatives will pay particular attention to it . . . and the Long Island coalition is getting hammered over Amazon."

"They need to show they can deliver, and congestion pricing is one of those issues that may not effect a lot of people, but it's getting a lot of attention and may be symbolic to residents," Levy said.

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