ROOTS OF RESISTANCE: UNDERSTANDING THE OPPOSITION TO CONGESTION PRICING IN NEW YORK CITY

Clover Chen

The University of Texas at Austin

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INTRODUCTION

Congestion pricing has proven a powerful tool for managing traffic, improving air quality, and funding public transit in global cities like London, Stockholm, and Singapore. Yet the long-term success of such programs depends not simply on their initial implementation, but on their capacity to adapt: periodic adjustments to pricing levels, cordon design, and complementary investment are necessary to maintain the program's effectiveness. As congestion pricing moves from implementation toward adaptation in New York City, persistent resistance threatens to reopen foundational debates with every policy adjustment.

This study examines the roots of that resistance through three recurring themes in opposition arguments: fairness, necessity, and distrust. Fairness addresses the burden placed on outer-borough drivers; necessity reflects the adaptation to limited mobility options; and distrust grows from a long history of institutional failure and broken promises.

These narratives reflect rational grievances born of systemic failure: where decades of disinvestment have conditioned driving as a necessity and undermined faith in institutional reform. However, even rational resistance can perpetuate systemic harm by delaying infrastructure improvement and reinforcing existing inequality.

Drawing on historical proposals, media representations, and original interviews with key stakeholders, this paper argues that fairness, necessity, and distrust have shaped public resistance to congestion pricing by reflecting real grievances. Without confronting these deeper anxieties, any congestion pricing improvements will remain vulnerable to backlashes and delays; understanding them is essential for forging a congestion pricing system that can endure political challenges and deliver lasting change.

INTERVIEWEE PROFILE

This paper incorporates insights from five semi-structured interviews conducted between March and April 2025 with experts, advocates, and former public officials involved in or knowledgeable about congestion pricing in New York City:

Lolita Jackson – Former Director of Special Projects under Mayor Bloomberg. Jackson was involved in the 2007 PlaNYC congestion pricing effort and offers a valuable perspective on what political messaging strategies fell short for the failed plan.

Rachel Weinberger – The Peter W. Herman Chair for Transportation at Regional Plan Association. Weinberger has written extensively on congestion pricing and equity issues and provided critical insight into the political narratives around fairness.

Em Friedenberg – Research Manager at Transportation Alternatives, a leading transit advocacy organization. Friedenberg led public campaigns around the CBDTP and commented on the evolution of messaging, advocacy, and institutional trust.

Sam Schwartz – Former NYC Traffic Commissioner and a longtime transportation consultant. Known as "Gridlock Sam," Schwartz played a central role in developing earlier versions of congestion pricing and continues to be involved today.

Danny Pearlstein – Policy & Communications Director at Riders Alliance. Pearlstein has been a public voice supporting congestion pricing, emphasizing equity, transparency, and storytelling to build public trust and counter-resistance narratives.

These interviews were conducted via phone or video call, recorded with permission, and transcribed for analysis. Interview responses were coded thematically to identify recurring narratives and critical concerns, which are examined alongside the historical and political context of New York City's congestion pricing initiative.

CONTEXT

The Foundation of Congestion Pricing

With congestion costing the average New York commuter 102 hours and over $1,800 in 2024 (INRIX, 2024), policymakers have long sought innovative solutions to mitigate its damages. One of the fundamental economic issues with traffic congestion is that roadway users do not consider the additional costs they impose on others when using congested facilities. These unaccounted-for costs, known as "externalities," lead to excessive demand and inefficiencies in road usage, pushing traffic levels beyond the social optimum. First proposed by William Vickrey in 1952, Congestion Pricing is designed to address this economic inefficiency by compelling drivers to “internalize” the external cost they impose (Bellafante, 2025). By imposing fees proportional to the social cost of each trip, congestion pricing discourages excessive road usage and incentivizes alternative transportation modes (Federal Highway Administration, 2008).

Introducing Congestion Pricing to New York City

Implemented in New York City in January 2025, the Central Business District Tolling Program (CBDTP) marked the nation's first cordon-based congestion pricing system. Under the CBDTP, vehicles entering the Congestion Relief Zone (CRZ) —all local Manhattan streets and avenues at or below 60th Street—are charged a toll. The peak period toll, which applies from 5 a.m. to 9 p.m. on weekdays, is set at $9 for passenger vehicles and is scheduled to increase to $12 in 2028 and $15 in 2031. The toll is halved overnight for passenger cars. Each passenger vehicle is only charged once a day for entrance. In contrast, trucks, buses, and taxis are subject to per-trip charges. Small trucks and buses are charged $14.40, while large trucks and tour buses are charged $21.60 respectively. These tolls are reduced to a quarter of the peak rate overnight to encourage off-peak crossing. For both the peak and overnight period, the per-trip charge for

high-volume for-hire vehicles is $1.50. For taxis, green cabs, and black cars, the per-trip charge is $0.75 (Metropolitan Transportation Authority [MTA], 2025a).

Revenue generated from the CBDTP is intended to fund $15 billion in capital improvements for the MTA's 2020-2024 Capital Program. The MTA projects $500 million in net revenue in the program's first year. In the first 27 days of the program, the CRZ has already generated $48.66 million in gross revenue, yielding a net operating revenue of $37.5 million (MTA, 2025b). Alongside revenue goals, the CBDTP is designed to reduce gridlock, shorten commute times, improve air quality, and create safer streets in New York City (MTA, 2025c).

Delivering Results

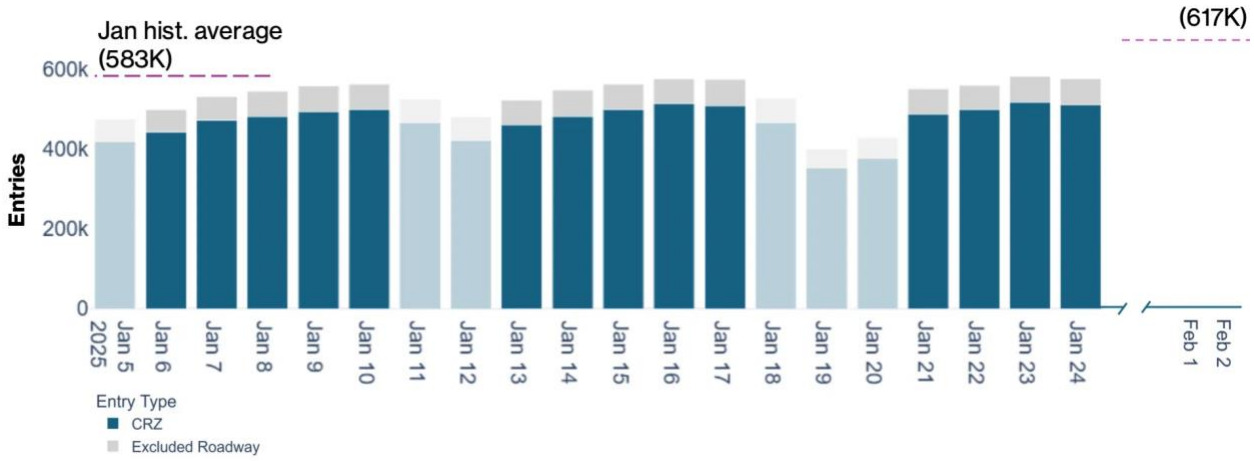
As of March 2025, the CBDTP has demonstrated promising results, delivering on both traffic and revenue goals in its first two months. According to the MTA (2025d), 1 million fewer vehicles have entered the most congested part of Manhattan between the program launch and the end of January. Motorists and buses are experiencing faster inbound trip times on all Hudson and East River crossings, and the improved traffic flow has enhanced the reliability of express bus service from the outer boroughs and led to increased ridership. On an average weekday, approximately 490,000 vehicles enter the CRZ, down from the historical January average of 583,000 (MTA, 2025e). Figure 1 provides a breakdown of average weekday entries in January, showing that the vehicle volume has declined consistently below historical averages. Meanwhile, Figure 2 shows a steady increase in the magnitude of change from the baseline of daily vehicle entries, with March showing a 13% reduction in volume to pre-CBDTP baselines.

Congestion pricing has been more effective than most people expected and is beginning to gain public support. A recent poll from the Siena College Research Institute (2025) found that 42% of New York City voters favor keeping the program, while 35% want it gone. This is a

significant improvement from the 32%-52% margin recorded in December by the same poll before the program's implementation. Still, despite these early successes, the political future of congestion pricing remains uncertain, as decades-old resistance continues to recur.

Figure 1.

Number of entries by day into the Central Business District, January 2025.



Note. From *Congestion Relief Zone Tolling: January 29, 2025 Update*, by Metropolitan Transportation Authority, 2025. https://www.mta.info/document/163411**.**

Figure 2.

Monthly Vehicle Entries into the CRZ Compared to Historical Averages

Month	Average Daily Entries	Daily Baseline (Historical Average)	Change from Baseline	Change from Baseline (%)	Total Fewer Entries per Month
January 2025	533,572	580,500	-46,928	-8%	-1,267,056
February 2025	541,407	613,900	-72,493	-12%	-2,029,804
March 2025	560,342	642,500	-82,158	-13%	-2,546,898

Note. From *Reduction in Vehicle Entries to the CBD*, by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, 2025. https://metrics.mta.info/?cbdtp/vehiclereductions

History of Resistance

Efforts to implement congestion pricing in New York City have faced resistance for nearly a century. Early 20th-century proposals to toll Manhattan bridges were opposed by

officials and commuters from Brooklyn, Queens, and New Jersey, a pattern that continues to this day (City Bridge Toll Plan, 1933; Newman, 2007; Chan, 2008).

Mayor Michael Bloomberg's 2007 proposal as a part of PlaNYC set an $8 fee for peak-hour entries and exits and a $4 fee for intra-zone trips, with a northern boundary on 86th Street. The plan failed amid vocal opposition from outer-borough officials and residents who distrusted the MTA and resented perceived favoritism toward Manhattan (Schaller, 2010).

Governor Andrew Cuomo revived congestion pricing in 2017 during a subway crisis, leading to the eventual passage of the Central Business District Tolling Program. Still, opposition persisted, including lawsuits and objections from lawmakers like Queens Assemblyman David Weprin, who cited the burden on transit-poor communities and disabled residents (Nir, 2018).

In 2024, Governor Kathy Hochul paused the program just weeks before its planned launch in June. Supporters of the pause echoed similar worries about affordability, fairness, and accountability (Office of Governor Kathy Hochul, 2024a). The program was eventually continued in November after a reduction in tolls (Office of Governor Kathy Hochul, 2024b).

In 2025, U.S. Secretary of Transportation Sean Duffy rescinded federal approval of the program, citing equity concerns and criticizing its use of toll revenue to fund transit rather than roadway infrastructure. Duffy argued that the tolls placed an unfair burden on lower- and middle-income drivers. Despite this, the program remains active amid ongoing legal challenges as of April 2025 (Chen & Weiser, 2025).

Across nearly a century of debate, opposition to congestion pricing has drawn on a consistent set of concerns: concerns over fairness, the necessity of driving, and distrust in

institutions. These recurring themes have both delayed implementation and exposed deeper systemic failures. Understanding them is critical to evaluating the resistance.

FAIRNESS

Introduction: Unfair Financial Burdens

Fairness concerns have long shaped opposition to congestion pricing in New York City. Opponents argue that the policy places an unfair financial burden on working-class residents of the outer boroughs, tapping into real grievances about the unequal geography of transit access and the high costs of living in New York City (RPA, 2015). Yet these narratives often frame congestion pricing as a continuation rather than a correction of systemic injustice. This section examines how fairness arguments resonate emotionally and reinforce resistance to reform.

Framing: Affront to Fairness

The U.S. Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy gave voice to this argument:

> "New York State's congestion pricing plan is a slap in the face to working-class Americans… The toll program leaves drivers without any free highway alternative, and instead, takes more money from working people to pay for a transit system and not highways. It's backwards and unfair…." (U.S. Department of Transportation, 2025)

The emotional resonance of this narrative lies in its appeal to fairness. The "double taxation" argument suggests that drivers already contribute through gas taxes and bridge tolls, and that congestion pricing adds yet another charge without providing a clear benefit.

This framing was echoed forcefully by Secretary Duffy (2025b) in an interview posted on X, who argued, *"*If you're rich, you can afford to drive. If you're working class, tough luck. This isn't congestion relief—it's class warfare.*"* Duffy cited fairness as a core justification for the federal government's revocation of support for New York's program. He claimed it was unjust for revenues raised from drivers to be reinvested in public transit rather than roadway infrastructure, and framed the program's revenue-raising goals as an "affront to fairness."

These concerns of fairness are often expressed through highly individualized stories. Media coverage from outlets like the New York Post frequently highlights the struggles of small business owners, blue-collar workers, or caregivers whose lives are framed as being upended by new tolls (Brown et al., 2025). These stories play an outsized role in shaping public opinion, even if statistically, they represent a small share of actual commuters. In doing so, they frame congestion pricing as a deeply personal burden.

Roots: Economic and Spatial Equity

Taken at face value, congestion pricing raises legitimate concerns about both economic and spatial equity. Critics like Richard L. Brodsky, a senior fellow at NYU's Robert F. Wagner School of Public Service, have described congestion pricing as “fundamentally regressive,” arguing that it disproportionately burdens lower-income individuals by consuming a greater share of their income compared to higher-income individuals (Flegenheimer, 2013). Beyond economic regressivity, the policy also raises questions of geographic fairness. Access to Manhattan's central business district remains highly unequal, with residents of outer-borough neighborhoods facing significantly greater barriers to employment opportunities based on transit access (Kaufman, 2015).

The narrative of fairness powerfully resonates because it taps into real frustrations with an already inequitable transportation system. When audiences hear stories of disruption and hardship from individuals, they are reminded of their own experiences navigating unreliable commutes. These personal grievances–rooted in systemic shortcomings–become conflated with the new policy, allowing congestion pricing to be seen as a continuation of a system that has long failed them. In this way, the fairness concern gains emotional traction by offering a familiar framework of personal hardship, even when the policy is designed to address these inequalities.

Critique: Unequal Status Quo

This critique of fairness assumes that the existing transportation landscape is more just than what congestion pricing proposes. But research from other cities suggests otherwise. In Bristol, England, focus groups found that transit systems designed radially for city center commutes often failed residents who needed cross-town access, leading to longer trips and higher fares (Lucas et al., 2016). In response to Brodsky's comments, proponents of congestion pricing argue that the existing toll structure is much more regressive (Fried, 2013).

Rachel Weinberger, reflecting on her own experience as a Brooklyn resident visiting her mother in Chelsea, noted that driving can be cheaper than transit for families. "If I take the subway with my two kids, it's almost $18 round trip. If I drive, it's $9." In this framing, driving remains a relative bargain. She argues that the fairness critique ignores a deeper reality: "Transit riders have been paying all along." New Jersey drivers, she adds, already pay high bridge tolls. The broader point is that the status quo is not inherently fair. Asking drivers to contribute through tolls may correct a longstanding imbalance, but still feels like an imposition because it disrupts entrenched expectations of cost and access.

Reflection:

Although toll revenues could fund improvements for underserved areas, many drivers view promised transit investments as distant or irrelevant to their immediate needs. As a result, what is framed as an unfair financial burden often reflects a deeper structural reality: in many outer-borough neighborhoods, residents drive not by choice, but because public transit is too slow, unreliable, or inaccessible. The fairness critique, in this way, is inseparable from the perception of driving as a necessity.

NECESSITY

Introduction: Necessity of Driving

Perceptions of driving as a necessity have also shaped opposition to congestion pricing. Opponents argue that unreliable, inaccessible, or unsafe transit leaves many outer-borough residents with no real alternative to driving. For many opponents, this view is shaped by negative personal experiences with reliability and safety with other modes, such as experiencing long delays in the subway or having to wait in the weather for a bus connection (Schaller, 2010). These arguments relate to frustration with service gaps, long commutes, and poor transit reliability (RPA, 2015) Yet these narratives often conflate driving with mobility itself, overlooking the systemic failures that limit real choice. This section examines how car culture reinforces perceptions of driving as essential, the structural issues that reinforce these perceptions, and how narratives of necessity often obscure true mobility needs.

Framing: Auto Culture

As Schaller (2010) notes, driving is associated with comfort, privacy, and autonomy. These qualities are difficult for transit systems to replicate. Rather than seeing the toll as a nudge toward alternative modes, many viewed it as a threat to their routine and identity. Much of the resistance stemmed from the perception that driving was the only viable option. Lolita Jackson emphasized outreach efforts in 2007, which focused on mass transit benefits, did not resonate with residents primarily concerned about local impacts like parking availability. In comparison, she noted that opposition in areas like the Upper East Side has softened in recent years—likely due to recent street transformations, improvement in transit, and an increasingly car-free population. This transformation suggests that resistance to congestion pricing is the strongest when communities do not perceive viable alternatives due to structural deficiencies.

Roots: Transit Gaps and Safety

The subway network leaves large portions of the city unserved, and bus service in the outer boroughs is often slow and unreliable. These service gaps particularly disadvantage commuters from outside the CBD, reinforcing the view that congestion pricing punishes people for systemic failures outside their control. Local buses in New York City travel at an average speed of just 8 miles per hour, while even express buses only average around 11 miles per hour. Compounding this issue, many neighborhoods remain beyond a reasonable walking distance from the nearest subway station (Regional Plan Association, 2015).

The issue of transit reliability also affects NJ commuters crossing the Hudson River, which consists of 38% of commuters into NYC according to the New York City Department of City Planning (n.d.). NJ Transit is known for lengthy delays, breakdowns, and infrequent service from the underfunded agency and its crumbling infrastructure (Burkett, 2024). In the Summer of 2024, only 83.2% of NJT Trains arrived within six minutes of schedule (Biryukov, 2024).

Another aspect preventing some commuters from seeing the subway as a viable alternative is the perception of safety. At the turn of 2025, a series of high-profile incidents of subway violence shocked the city just as congestion pricing took effect (Haigh and Izaguirre, 2024; Rosman, 2025). The issue of safety escalated when the U.S. Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy (2025) warned the MTA that federal funding could be withheld unless it reduced subway crime. Statistically, however, the risk of being a victim of violent crime in the subway was remote compared to the dangers of driving (Barron, 2025). In spite of this, the public does not feel safe in the subways. As of a 2023 poll by the Citizens Budget Commission, 49 percent of New Yorkers feel safe during the day, down from 86 percent in 2008. The accusations against subway safety continue to heighten even as crime rates fall (Coleman, 2025).

Critique: The Privilege to Deny

Danny Pearlstein of Riders Alliance offered a counterpoint to the idea that driving is universally necessary. He described some opposition to congestion pricing as coming from individuals with "the privilege to deny." These are people who own cars and resist change because it threatens their convenience. "The opposition do not do anything, all they do is complain. It is a privilege to deny that we should get something done," Pearlstein stated. This perspective highlights a tension within the necessity narrative: while some truly depend on driving due to inadequate transit, others invoke necessity as a defense of the status quo.

The perceived necessity of driving often stems from a genuine necessity for mobility, but car culture blurred the distinction between the two. Meanwhile, those most harmed by the system's failures are often people with no cars and no convenient transit access. According to the Regional Plan Association (2015), high-poverty, carless households in transit-desert neighborhoods like East Tremont, East Harlem, and Canarsie stand to benefit the most from reinvestments funded by congestion pricing. Yet their mobility needs are frequently overshadowed by the louder resistance of drivers defending an unequal status quo.

Reflection: No Alternatives

The "privilege to deny" highlights a broader problem first seen in fairness arguments, opposition to congestion pricing often frames transit improvements as unattainable and defends the current system as the best achievable option. In areas underserved by transit, driving becomes synonymous with basic mobility, and many are unwilling to compromise it. As with fairness arguments, necessity arguments often reflect a skepticism that new policies can meaningfully address people's needs. The conflation of mobility with driving not only entrenches inequality; it fuels a deeper distrust in institutions that claim to offer alternatives.

DISTRUST

Introduction: Institutional Distrust

Deep-rooted distrust of public institutions strongly shapes resistance to congestion pricing. Skeptics argue that agencies like the MTA cannot be trusted to manage revenue fairly or deliver promised improvements, tapping into real grievances about past fiscal mismanagement and political neglect. Yet these narratives often escalate into blanket cynicism, portraying congestion pricing as purely exploitative rather than reformative. This section examines how distrust resonates with historical failures while distorting debates around the program's goals.

This distrust manifests through two distinct, but related arguments: congestion pricing is merely a money-making scheme designed to extract more taxes from working people, and even if intentions are good, the MTA is too inefficient and mismanaged to be trusted with the revenue it collects.

Framing: Congestion Pricing as Exploitation

Framing congestion pricing as a cash grab is not unique to New York. During London's 2021 consultation for expanding its Congestion Charge Zone, the view of "Congestion Charge is just another tax/money-making scheme" was one of the most cited objections, appearing in 1,070 out of 9,680 responses. Despite London's experience with congestion pricing dating back to 2003, the idea that such policies primarily serve to line government coffers remains remarkably persistent. The same arguments exist in New York City and among its local politicians. Brooklyn Councilman Kalman Yeger stated bluntly in February 2024, "This is simply a scheme to take billions of dollars from the taxpayers of New York City and funnel it into a failing agency" (Fox 5 New York, 2024). These statements tap into a broader cynicism about government motives: congestion pricing is not seen as a tool but as a stealth tax burdening everyday New Yorkers.

Roots: Inefficiency in Spending

Even when New Yorkers accept the need for infrastructure reinvestment, many remain skeptical that the MTA can be trusted to spend new revenue responsibly. This skepticism is deeply rooted in the agency's historical track record. Since its creation in 1968, the MTA has been marred by cost overruns, delayed projects, and broken promises.

Recent examples only reinforce this distrust. The Grand Central Madison Terminal project, initially promised decades ago, opened more than 10 years behind schedule and billions over budget (Nessen and Khalifeh, 2025). A 2017 New York Times investigation found "excessive staffing, little competition, generous contracts, and archaic rules dramatically inflate capital costs for transit in New York." The recently completed Second Avenue subway on Manhattan's Upper East Side and the 2015 extension of the No. 7 line to Hudson Yards also cost far above average, at $2.5 billion and $1.5 billion per mile, respectively (Rosenthal, 2017).

Critique: Political Disinvestment

Rachel Weinberger, a leading transportation researcher, attempted to dispel the notion of "just another tax". As she explained, the MTA is responsible for maintaining a massive and aging transportation system — one that demands constant, expensive reinvestment. "The MTA is legally required to develop a capital plan every five years," she points out. "When they present the new capital plan, the media runs away with, 'Here they come again, asking for more money,' without acknowledging that the funding was inadequate in the first place." An MTA analysis (2024) found that the MTA actually underinvested compared to similar large infrastructure agencies due to the lack of funding. If MTA were to invest in its capital assets at a level comparable to its private industry peers, it would equate to $16 billion per year (in 2027 dollars), or $80 billion in the MTA 2020-2024 Capital Program, as opposed to $54.8 billion.

Furthermore, a deeper examination reveals that the MTA's problems are not merely the result of internal mismanagement. As shown in an investigation by the New York Times, in total, $1.5 billion was stripped from the MTA through diverted taxes and payments for non-essential services. While the MTA is often blamed for service failures and budget gaps, much of the dysfunction stems from choices made outside the agency's control (Rosenthal et al, 2017).

Em Friedenberg emphasized that "institutional distrust became a scapegoat": blaming the MTA obscures the larger history of disinvestment and policy choices that prioritized cars over transit. Generations of state politicians underfunded the transit system while diverting earmarked funds for other priorities, including highway construction and toll reductions for drivers, Em claims. Danny Pearlstein adds that the MTA was "created as a punching bag" so politicians could avoid accountability. "When you attack the MTA," he adds, "you're attacking the customers of the MTA." While frustration with the MTA's inefficiencies is understandable, Pearlstein argues that relentless attacks ultimately harm transit users, not just bureaucrats. When funding is withheld from an agency due to the perception of inefficiency, it is not the agency that suffers most, but the public it is meant to serve.

Reflection: Cynicism and Delays

As distrust deepens, policies like congestion pricing face setbacks rooted in the infrastructure challenges they were designed to solve. While distrust in the MTA stems from real institutional failures, it has since hardened into a broader cynicism shared among the local population and distorts current debates. This persistent skepticism makes it harder for the agency to rebuild trust, delay critical investment, and ultimately reinforce the very failures it criticizes.

DISCUSSION

Throughout my research, it became clear that many proponents of congestion pricing have tended to dismiss opposition as purely reactionary or self-interested. While the arguments for congestion pricing are often grounded in evidence, it is too quick to dismiss the opponents' arguments in a policy debate. In response, the first part of this study argued that such resistance is rooted in grievances born from systemic failures that conditioned inequitable mobility, eroded public trust, and entrenched car dependency.

Yet recognizing the roots of resistance does not excuse its consequences. Opposition narratives, fueled by emotions and frustrations, have repeatedly stalled, weakened, and distorted New York City's congestion pricing efforts. The political outcomes of resistance are evident: the collapse of the 2007 proposal, the halting of the program before the 2024 election as a political strategy, and the erosion of public trust following the pause and modification of toll levels. As Lolita Jackson observed, the abrupt pause "lost complete trust in the state government," alienating both business leaders and elected officials who had supported congestion pricing.

Combined with a protracted environmental review, a flurry of lawsuits, and escalating political attacks, opposition left congestion pricing mired in controversy even as it moved forward. Public sentiment now reflects this fatigue and disillusionment: Governor Hochul's approval rating has fallen below 40% (MaristPoll, 2025).

These outcomes reveal the political fragility of congestion pricing and highlight the urgent need for greater responsiveness and engagement with public concerns. The second part of this paper examines the tangible costs of delay, not only in financial terms, but in the loss of momentum and trust that will shape the future of mobility policy in New York City. It then considers strategies for moving forward with a deeper understanding of the roots of resistance.

THE COST OF DELAYS

Delays in implementing congestion pricing carry tangible consequences: lost funding, deferred infrastructure improvements, and diminished credibility. These setbacks are the direct outcomes of opposition narratives prevailing. This section draws on expert interviews to examine how narrative-driven hesitation translated into measurable policy setbacks, focusing especially on the impact of Governor Hochul's 2024 pause.

Deferred Funding and Projects

Governor Hochul's sudden reversal on congestion pricing left the MTA's budget in limbo, jeopardizing the $15 billion in funding critical to its 2020–2024 capital improvement plan. The New York Times reported that postponing the program stalled funding for projects like elevator installations, signal upgrades, and subway extensions—investments essential to improving accessibility and reliability across the transit system (Ley et al., 2024).

As Bronx Congressman Ritchie Torres put it in response to the pause:

> "Perpetuating the disinvestment from public transit will have a disproportionately destructive impact on the lowest income communities of color, who disproportionately depend on public transit for their livelihood" (Jones, 2024).

Thus, the delay deepened the very inequities that fairness narratives had highlighted.

Sidelining of Other Projects

Beyond funding, the pause had a cascading effect on advocacy momentum. As Em Friedenberg of Transportation Alternatives explained, "As advocates, we had to focus so much energy on getting congestion pricing started that we weren't able to advocate for other things with that energy." Instead of building forward momentum on projects like the Queensboro Bridge South Outer Roadway Street Improvements, activist groups had to divert resources

toward defending congestion pricing. Had the program launched as scheduled, that momentum could have fueled broader system improvements, addressing some of the mobility needs that necessity narratives brought to light.

Political Acceptance

Lolita Jackson suggested that politically, the pause signaled ambivalence at a crucial moment from the state government. “Once you back off a plan right before implementation, it becomes harder to rebuild that trust,” she noted. The delay opened the door for federal interference, with the Trump administration threatening the program, and deprived the plan of the early public acceptance that might have come from real-world results.

Recent data shows that public support for congestion pricing tends to rise post-implementation, but the postponement cost the plan valuable time to accumulate that goodwill (Siena College Research Institute, 2025). Worse, it satisfied neither opponents, who remained critical, nor supporters, who felt betrayed.

The Design

Rachel Weinberger and Sam Schwartz both remarked that the final designs of the program are the product of political compromise. Weinberger noted that features like the flat-rate toll reduction from $15 to $9 and the simpler toll structure were chosen for political feasibility, but were less efficient systems of pricing. These concessions made the policy easier to communicate in a political environment, but they also weakened its potential benefits.

The consequences of delay reveal that political support for congestion pricing is deeply fragile when systemic grievances are unaddressed. If congestion pricing is to survive and fulfill its promise, it must become a part of an adaptive system of policies that responds seriously to the root causes of resistance.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The same narratives that delayed New York City's congestion pricing program will continue to shape its future. To ensure the policy remains both effective and resilient, the MTA and city officials must respond directly to the deeper concerns embedded in each theme of opposition narrative—necessity, fairness, and distrust—by translating them into improvements.

Reclaiming Streetspace

To address the perceived necessity of driving, the city must reclaim street space for expanded bus lanes, protected bike paths, and pedestrian infrastructure. These changes improve mobility and challenge the perception of driving as the only option. Congestion pricing is a critical first step toward reducing car reliance, but it must be paired with visible investments that make alternative modes more viable and attractive.

As Lolita Jackson observed, early resistance from Upper East Side residents stemmed from fears of losing car access and parking. In neighborhoods where car use is routine, physical changes to the streetscape can reshape habits and perceptions, making non-car modes more visible, reliable, and appealing. She noted that opposition in these same neighborhoods has softened over time, partly due to the proliferation of bike infrastructure and pedestrian improvements during and after the pandemic.

London provides a useful example for New York City to follow. Following the launch of its congestion charge, Transport for London (TfL) rapidly expanded protected bike lanes, bus corridors, and pedestrian zones. A modal shift study done on the United Kingdom by Song et al. (2017) found that actual exposure to improved infrastructure—such as using new bike lanes and pedestrian facilities—was significantly associated with a shift toward active travel modes, even after controlling for personal and household characteristics.

Targeted Reinvestments

To address concerns around fairness, congestion pricing revenue must be invested in communities that have historically been underserved by transit. Projects like the Interborough Express (IBX), which aims to connect Brooklyn and Queens via underutilized rail lines, offer a promising model. But more immediate improvements—like expanded bus service with dedicated lanes—can deliver near-term benefits while longer-term infrastructure takes shape.

According to a 2016 report by the Regional Plan Association, a typical transit trip between the Bronx and Queens can take over an hour each way—far exceeding the citywide average. Improving cross-borough connectivity would not only make daily life easier for outer-borough residents, but also support economic development in the boroughs. Prioritizing such investments would help congestion pricing fulfill its promise of fairness by reducing the reliance on cars for those who currently lack better options.

Dynamic Pricing

While the current design charges a flat rate, emerging data will allow the MTA to shift toward more efficient and flexible pricing models in the future. Adjusting rates based on time of day or congestion level could more effectively manage traffic demand and reduce road pressure.

Sam Schwartz has advocated for technologies like Skymeter, a GPS-based system that allows for per-mile or per-minute tolling. Singapore's Electronic Road Pricing system, which charges drivers based on real-time traffic conditions, provides a compelling precedent. These systems align closely with William Vickrey's original vision of congestion pricing: one that is not only efficient but also fairer to drivers who use roads less intensively.

Mori et al. (2024) found that delay-based tolling had a greater effect on reducing vehicle hours traveled than cordon-based flat pricing. Transitioning to dynamic tolls would allow New

York to refine the system's efficiency without increasing overall costs. Over time, technology upgrades could replace the current E-ZPass system with more precise, distance-based charges—starting with commercial vehicles and expanding to personal vehicles (RPA, 2019).

Messaging and Transparency

Finally, public support is shaped not only by what the government delivers, but by what people see and understand about these actions. Without effective and visible communications, even the best reinvestments and upgrades risk being minimized.

First, the MTA must proactively publicize tangible successes, consistently tying revenue milestones, infrastructure improvements, and service upgrades directly to congestion pricing. These achievements must be made visible inside the system itself through banners in trains, displays in stations, and brochures on buses. This ensures that every rider can see the connection between system improvements and their own experiences.

Second, the agency must center emotionally resonant personal stories that highlight the benefit of congestion pricing: faster commutes, safer intersections, and stronger local businesses. As opposition narratives often succeed by appealing the individual hardships, supporters must build equally resonant stories, much like the successful Vision Zero campaign.

Third, the agency must launch a public congestion pricing dashboard that clearly tracks toll revenue, project spending, and construction timelines. Making this information accessible, interactive and regularly updated will allow journalists, researchers, and residents to independently verify progress and have a reference for public discourse.

By taking these concrete steps to ensure visibility, personability and transparency, the MTA can rebuild public trust and ensure that congestion pricing is not only implemented, but embraced as the first step in a legitimate and lasting reform.

CONCLUSION

The resistance to congestion pricing in New York City reflects more than opposition to a single policy; it reveals deeper structural failures that have conditioned how fairness, mobility, and trust are perceived. At its core, opposition to congestion pricing is a reflection of the failures that made reform necessary, yet difficult.

Throughout this paper, I have argued that the roots of resistance arguments—fairness, necessity, and distrust—should not be dismissed as reactionary, but recognized as deeply rooted grievances born from decades of disinvestment, inequitable opportunity access, and eroded public trust. Acknowledging the legitimacy of these grievances does not excuse the fact that resistance has perpetuated systemic harm; rather, it offers a pathway for developing policies and communication strategies that can rebuild support and trust.

Without serious engagement with these deeper anxieties, future adaptations of congestion pricing will remain vulnerable to backlash, delays, and diminished effectiveness. For congestion pricing to realize its promise, it must be accompanied by visible reinvestments in underserved communities and a sustained effort to rebuild trust in the MTA.

Congestion pricing is only the first step toward an equitable transportation future in New York City. As the program begins to deliver real improvements, policymakers must build on its momentum to drive broader transportation reforms. Along the way, they will continue to encounter resistance born of past failures, and they must meet those concerns not with dismissal, but through sustained, visible reform. True reform will not come from silencing opposition, but from listening carefully to its roots and answering them with lasting change.

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