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N.Y. Drivers' Unexpected Allies: Transit Riders

By [WILLIAM NEUMAN](#)

A small group of Democratic state senators from Brooklyn, Queens and the Bronx have blocked a financial rescue proposal for the [Metropolitan Transportation Authority](#) because it would require tolls on the East River and Harlem River bridges.

They have taken this position even though the plan is meant to help hold down transit fares, and in their districts — as in the city overall — commuters who ride subways and buses easily outnumber those who drive to work.

But interviews with residents in these districts revealed that the holdout legislators have tapped into a concern shared by many of their constituents, even among those where it might be least unexpected: transit riders. And while toll opponents made up a spirited minority among straphangers interviewed in recent days, their views stood out, because they were both unexpected and passionately held.

“I think it’s unfair to tax drivers to pay for those using public transportation,” Serena Burch, 37, said as she waited on a recent afternoon for a bus near [Brooklyn College](#), where she is a full-time student. “Why should the bridge commuters pay for the subway commuters in Brooklyn?”

Ms. Burch, who lives near Kings Plaza, did not know who her senator was or what his position was on tolls. But as it turned out, they were in agreement. Her senator is [Carl Kruger](#), who has been one of the staunchest opponents of new tolls.

Ms. Burch said she would be against the tolls even if establishing them would help keep transit fares lower.

Several blocks away, Celia Groenveldt, a Flatbush resident, waiting on the platform at the Newkirk Avenue station of the Nos. 2 and 5 trains. Her senator is Kevin S. Parker, another outspoken toll opponent. She was pleased to find that he was against tolls on what have long been free bridges.

“It shuts everyone out who can’t afford to get into the city or through the city,” said Ms. Groenveldt, a bookkeeper who works in Manhattan.

In the Soundview section of the Bronx, John Garcia, 33, a plumber with a job in Manhattan, is represented by Senator [Rubén Díaz Sr.](#), another vocal toll opponent. Mr. Garcia said that even though he was a regular subway rider, he worried about the effect of tolls on the small businesses that frequently use the Harlem River bridges.

“Tolling the bridges is going to hurt a lot of people that own plumbing companies, construction companies, cabs, deliverymen,” Mr. Garcia said, adding that he would prefer higher subway fares to new tolls.

Several subway riders said they opposed both tolls and higher fares and expressed a deep distrust of the transportation authority.

“The whole organization is very inefficient,” said Boris Gertsberg, 33, a software developer who lives in Mr. Kruger’s district in Brooklyn and takes the subway daily to his office in Manhattan. He said he did not drive a car but was still against tolls. “I don’t think looking at hiking fares or putting tolls is the right way to solve the budgetary crisis they’re in,” he said.

The interviews were conducted as a proposed rescue plan for the financially troubled authority was stalled in the Senate. The plan, which includes tolls and a payroll tax, is supported by Gov. [David A. Paterson](#) and Assembly Speaker [Sheldon Silver](#). The plan also called for fare revenues to increase by 8 percent, and is intended to prevent a raft of service cuts and a 23 percent jump in fare revenues that the authority says will be necessary if no rescue is passed. The new tolls would match the subway fare, which is \$2.

The Senate is controlled by Democrats, who have a 32-to-30 seat edge over Republicans. But about six Democrats have said they oppose the tolls and have prevented the plan from passing. Instead, Senate leaders last week offered their own, toll-free plan, with a 4 percent fare increase, but it was rejected by the governor, Mr. Silver and authority officials, who said it did not provide enough revenue to support the authority over the long term.

While straphangers who opposed tolls were in the minority of those interviewed, far more common in the interviews last week were transit riders who feared the looming fare increases and supported bridge tolls.

“I will support anything that would cause less money to come out of my pocket,” said Melissa Jean, who lives in Mill Basin, Brooklyn, in Mr. Kruger’s district.

Kelvin Ruiz, 19, lives in Jackson Heights, Queens, in the district of another antitoll senator, Hiram Monserrate. Mr. Ruiz, who hopes to become a policeman, attends school at John Jay College in Manhattan and works at a gift shop in Rockefeller Center. He said he earned little and that transit costs were a burden.

“The M.T.A. affects more people,” he said in explaining why fares should be kept down at the expense of toll-paying drivers.

Few of those interviewed could identify their state senator or what his stance was on the tolls. Many directed their anger over rising fares at the authority or Mayor [Michael R. Bloomberg](#), who has no direct control over fares. But some expressed anger at the politicians who might block the authority rescue.

“I don’t think it’s fair either way, but worst-case scenario is raising” the fares, said Jeanette Rodriguez, 38, who takes the bus and subway from her home in the University Heights section of the Bronx to her job as an office manager at [Weill Cornell Medical Center](#) in Manhattan. When told that her senator, [Pedro Espada Jr.](#), was a toll opponent, she expressed displeasure.

“He’s not really in favor of the commuters,” she said. “If you’re in favor of raising the fare, who knows what’s next?”

In all of these Senate districts, data from the 2000 census shows that transit commuters make up a hefty majority. Data from more recent census surveys reinforces that conclusion.

In Mr. Kruger's district, the 2000 census estimated that about 56,000 people regularly took public transportation to work, while about 47,000 drove to work, according to data compiled by the [Regional Plan Association](#), a civic organization that supports the authority rescue. But among those drivers, only about 6,000 drove to jobs in Manhattan, and a majority of them would be expected to pay the new tolls.

The census estimated that there were about 64,000 transit commuters in Mr. Parker's district in 2000, compared with about 36,000 auto commuters, about 5,000 of whom drove to jobs in Manhattan. By another measure, in East Flatbush, one of the neighborhoods in Mr. Parker's district, the percentage of workers who commute by transit rose to 68 percent in 2007, from 62 percent in 2000, according to a recent report by the Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy at [New York University](#).

Mr. Parker said that he opposed the authority proposal in part because he believed that money from bridge tolls should be used for bridge maintenance, not financing mass transit. He said he had heard from both sides among his constituents and would not make his decision based on the preponderance of transit users over drivers.

"I don't think just about my district," Mr. Parker said. "I think about everybody in Brooklyn, everybody in the City of New York and the people of the state, and I don't think this is the best way to do this, particularly when there are other alternatives."

Annie Correal, Mick Meenan and Mathew R. Warren contributed reporting.
