Yesterday, New York's Metropolitan Transportation Authority approved the city's long-planned and hotly debated congestion pricing program, the first of its kind in the US. The program will involve a $15 toll for vehicles entering midtown or lower Manhattan, with discounts for some qualifying drivers and credits for bridge and tunnel tolls so drivers aren't double-charged. It is expected to raise about $1 billion annually for transit and transportation investments.

The plan is already being challenged in court by the expected mix of outer-borough and neighboring state representatives who call the plan an unfair tax on commuters and right-wing groups that oppose regulation and transit in equal measure. It is a monumental step, regardless of the outcome of these cases.

While no California city is quite like New York, as I wrote all the way back in 2019, the New York program certainly merits California policymakers' attention. Accurately accounting for the impact of vehicle travel on congestion, air quality, and the climate requires some form of congestion pricing. London, Singapore, and Stockholm have pioneered pricing programs with documented benefits across all three metrics, plus hundreds of millions of dollars for transit investments to support more climate- and lung-friendly means to reach city centers. New York should soon join these global leaders.

As California local governments seek to reduce transportation emissions and build more connected, sustainable communities–and as the California Air Resources Board calls for a 30 percent reduction in vehicle miles traveled to reach the state's 2045 carbon neutrality target–they must include congestion pricing measures as part of the conversation, alongside other strategies to price and reduce vehicle miles and fund preferred travel modes. Failure to do so would constitute a simple abandonment of these long-established state climate goals.

CLEE's 2022 revenue analysis of San Francisco's Climate Action Plan called for a revival of the city's dormant congestion pricing initiative (and expanded parking pricing) to deliver public health benefits and hundreds of millions of dollars per year for low-carbon transportation development in California's densest communities. With the city's and the region's business districts still recovering from the past four years, such pricing is challenging to consider, and it isn't necessarily appropriate for all California cities. But the persistence of New York leaders through a decade of political and legal challenges should show Bay Area leaders that it is possible. And, given a few years to generate billions for efficient and community-centered transit investments, they might even show that it's popular.