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Gale A. Brewer, Borough President

Testimony of Manhattan Borough President Gale A. Brewer New York City Council Committee on Transportation On How New York City Can Better Address Congestion

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My name is Gale Brewer and I am the Manhattan Borough President. Thank you, Chair Rodriguez, for holding this hearing on congestion, a topic of huge concern for constituents of Manhattan. Thank you as well for providing me the opportunity to testify today.

Manhattan's gridlocked traffic is as iconic as Central Park, the Chrysler Building, or MoMA but a lot less pleasant to be stuck in. The volume of people, cars, trucks, and buses traveling our streets each day is massive, contributing to a host of problems for the borough. A 2013 study by the U.S. Census Bureau found that commuters entering Manhattan cause its population to practically double each day, going from 1.58 million to 3.08 million, by far the largest fluctuation in the country.

But we don't really need statistics to tell us that Manhattan is facing an increasing problem with congestion. Ask anyone who's been behind the wheel of a car or truck; anyone who's hailed a taxi, hired an Uber, or boarded a bus; or anyone who's ridden a bicycle or motorcycle in the borough over the past five years. Every commuter has a story attesting to this worsening problem. As Borough President, I hear these stories almost daily—the carpooling office workers stuck for hours trying to enter the Holland tunnel, the frustrated taxi drivers and passengers struck in traffic after a concert lets out at Madison Square Garden, the bus riders delayed by increasingly slower rides across Manhattan.

Several years ago, in an effort to ascertain a complete view of congestion in Manhattan, I invoked, for the first time, the powers of the Borough President under NYC Charter § 82 part 5, to hold public hearings on matters of public interest. And while there was no consensus among the experts, policy analysts, and advocates who testified that day, there did appear to be a smart combination of efforts that could help us begin to make progress on this seemingly insurmountable problem.

I compiled these suggestions into a report titled “Unlocking the Grid,” which was released last year by my office. Aside from long-sought infrastructure investments like new cross-harbor rail tunnels, my plan includes several lower-cost, outside-the-box ideas as well such as expanding “off-hours” truck deliveries and taking advantage of MTA's commuter rail routes for intracity commuters.

To pay for these improvements, however, we need to begin resourcing our public transit system in the manner a world-class city deserves. The best plan I've seen for doing so without dramatically raising prices on commuters is a "fair tolling" plan similar to that proposed by engineer Sam Schwartz's Move NY. Such a plan would overhaul toll prices in a more fair manner, adding new tolls to the currently toll-free East River bridges and a new toll for vehicles crossing 60th Street in Manhattan, while tweaking or reducing tolls on many existing toll bridges to increase fairness.

The effect will be to eliminate the incentive for "bridge-shopping," which creates congestion on and around the four East River bridges into Manhattan's core. The plan creates a two-for-one benefit, both spreading out traffic concentrated on toll-free routes, and raising toll revenue overall (despite the price reductions on many major bridges) which can be devoted to transportation infrastructure investments.

I strongly believe we need a plan like Move NY in order to address the problem of congestion, and call on Mayor de Blasio and Governor Cuomo to get behind this or another plan to address congestion. But we have to be practical as well. Too often, the conversation around traffic and transit solutions is focused on billion-dollar, multi-year infrastructure projects or politically intractable ideas. So we shouldn't let the perfect be the enemy of the good, and also focus our efforts on ideas that require little or no capital investment and which could be implemented quickly. These include the following ideas:

- **Encourage night deliveries.** A year-long NYC DOT pilot program involved 33 companies making deliveries between 7:00 pm and 6:00 am, resulted in travel speeds increased by as much as 75 percent, and a three-fold decrease in the amount of time trucks spent parked making curbside deliveries. This pilot should be rapidly expanded.
- **Expand "City Ticket" to make better use of commuter rail.** City Ticket is an MTA pilot program allowing intra-city travel on the Metro North and Long Island Railroad commuter rail lines for a reduced fare on weekends. This pilot program could be dramatically expanded to speed commutes and get more city residents using mass transit, by putting the reduced fares into effect seven days a week and integrating fare collection with the MetroCard system.
- **Increase the gas tax.** With gasoline prices at their lowest in years, now is the time to raise revenue to improve and expand mass transit service by increasing New York State's gasoline tax. States with avowedly fiscally conservative leaders, including Georgia and Utah, have already taken advantage of lower crude oil prices to raise gasoline taxes and invest in infrastructure.

Though I believe these policy proposals will go a long way toward helping curb our congestion problem in Manhattan, we must stay in continued dialogue around the issue. I look forward to working with my fellow elected officials, transportation experts, advocates, and community members to implement many of the above recommendations to get NYC moving again.