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Stuck In Traffic

It's safe for me to say that most of you have been stuck in traffic in NYC at some point, and I don't need to have any magic power to know that. You know, being late to work, thinking about life, feeling hopeless while coming up with new excuses to tell your boss. This for sure isn't a good way to start our day, but it's something many of us have to experience every single day. The reason we're meeting today is to explore possible solutions to improve traffic in New York, and at the same time, improve our lives.

New York City commuters spend an average 92 hours in traffic each year, and, according to the New York Post, "New York City had the worst traffic congestion in the U.S. in 2020." This doesn't come as a big surprise considering NYC is the most densely populated big city in the country. Generally speaking, traffic congestion is a big problem that affects our daily lives. As an Uber driver, I experience this issue every day for almost the entire shift, which gives me time to constantly think about the problem and the different possible actions the city could take in order to solve, or at least improve the flow of traffic.

It is important to say that heavy traffic delays are not a New York problem. We know every big town or city experiences slow downs during certain times due to different causes, like rush hour commuting, big concerts or sport events, street fairs, parades, and road construction (this also includes doing maintenance to bridges and tunnels.) We know some of these circumstances are impossible to avoid. At least nowadays, people must commute back and forth to work, school, events, and even visiting friends or relatives. It's also necessary to keep the city's

infrastructure in good condition, which usually means partial or total road closures. If we consider all of this, it might seem that there's not much we can do to solve the traffic problem. However, there are still some actions the city could take.

Sam Schwartz, former NYC traffic commissioner and creator of the term "gridlock," in an interview for the New York Times said that automating the enforcement of illegal parking could be one way of improving traffic. I personally can see how this approach could help. Sometimes illegally parked vehicles, especially the ones in double parking, create bottlenecks by blocking lanes. Another solution would be expanding public transportation by investing in the subway system or creating more bus lanes. Betsy Plum, executive director of Riders Alliance, said in an interview "we have 6,000 miles of road in New York City and a little over 100 miles of bus lanes." I'm aware there might be different perspectives when it comes to bus lanes. Many of you would hate the bus lane approach, while others would benefit from it. Because even though creating new bus lanes might seem like a logical improvement to public transportation, many city drivers believe it makes traffic worse for most vehicles. Then, what are other less conflicting ways of solving the traffic problem? If by less conflicting we mean very controversial, NYC has a new solution.

New York is about to become the first state to implement a congestion tax. For those who don't know, congestion tax or congestion pricing is basically a toll for driving into the downtown area. As of today, New York transportation authorities are planning to charge a daily fee of about \$12 to every car, and \$25 to every truck driving below 60th street in Manhattan. This would discourage many people from driving, and go for public transportation instead. In theory, it works. We already have examples from some European cities that have implemented a congestion tax. Transport for London (TfL) reported that charging a congestion charge in

London reduced traffic by 15% and congestion – that is, the extra time a trip would take because of traffic – by 30%. On the other hand, we have the controversial side of this approach. Many people from New York and New Jersey already oppose the idea. They argue that this is another way of the city charging more tax to the working class in a city where it's already very expensive to survive. I have to say, even though I'm sure the congestion charge would help decrease traffic jams in the city, it's also going to have a bigger impact on low-income families. Being an Uber driver who drives into the downtown area every day, I don't think I could afford to pay a \$12 fee every day. That would be about \$300 extra every month. I really hope the city makes an exemption for taxis and for-hire vehicles, especially knowing that a congestion fee is already being taken from every ride taken in Manhattan below 96th street. I also believe there are easier ways of improving the flow of traffic.

Something that I've seen in my years working as an Uber driver is that many of the longest delays are caused by traffic accidents. From small fender benders that could be easily moved to the side of the road, to serious accidents that sometimes cause the full closure of a road. Having said that, I believe that by taking these accidents more seriously the city could help create a safer city, and at the same time, reduce congestion. They could increase the penalties or repercussions for causing an accident. That on its own would make people drive more safely. Also by creating better driving education programs. Teaching drivers how to make proper turns that don't interfere with the flow of traffic, or avoiding blocking the intersections. These are some easier and less conflicting steps the city could take to improve traffic conditions. Nevertheless, I don't think it would be enough to solve the problem completely.

In conclusion, no matter which of these solutions we choose, there are always going to be pros and cons. There are going to be people in favor and people against it. There are also going

to be good and bad side effects. In the end, it's hard to predict the future, especially in a place so unpredictable as New York City. What we know for sure is that something has to be done. We can't be sitting in traffic, hoping for things to get better on their own. So let's consider the possible solutions, let's start implementing them, and let's get there on time every time.