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Statement at June 8, 2007 NYS Assembly Hearing on NYC's Sustainability Proposal

The Institute for Rational Urban Mobility, Inc. (IRUM) is a NYC-based not-for-profit corporation concerned with enhancing mobility and reducing the negative impacts of over-dependence on motor vehicles in dense urban places. IRUM is very pleased that the relevant Assembly Standing Committees are holding this hearing on "NYC's Sustainability Proposal". Those of us involved with metropolitan transportation planning are particularly impressed with Mayor Michael Bloomberg's 2030 PlaNYC proposal because of its comprehensive nature and the absence of coherent planning in NYC for many years. IRUM supports, in principle, the environmental initiatives contained in the plan. In particular, IRUM has long advocated three measures that, when considered together, offer the potential for greatly enhancing the livability and economic viability of our crowded city. These measures are *Transportation Initiatives #10 "Pilot Congestion Pricing"*; and #5 "*Improve local commuter rail service*"; and *Open Space Initiative #6 "Create a public plaza in every community."*

Improving public transit in the near term is critical. Widespread support for congestion pricing can only be expected if there are immediate, tangible improvements that make public transit more attractive. It is important for the legislature to devise a mechanism for channeling the funds generated by congestion pricing into near term service increases and price enhancements that the riding public will notice. It is critical that these funds not simply replace existing city and state funds used to support the MTA. With MTA facing an immediate funding crisis it is imperative that the legislature establish a commission to devise a long range financial plan that assures that all the beneficiaries of high quality public transit are fairly assessed. MTA's recent experience with unlimited ride passes and free bus-subway transfers shows that price does matter. Ridership has soared with these fare innovations. IRUM has recently begun a research study of the benefits and costs of combining cordon road pricing with reduced or free transit fares. A preliminary analysis suggests that cordon tolls set at current London price levels, but imposed at all hours would generate revenues sufficient to replace bus and subway fares. The results of this study will be available later this summer.

Move Forward on Regional Rail

Perhaps the most significant near term public transit improvement can come from remaking the commuter rail lines serving the NY-NJ-CT metropolitan area into a Regional Rail system with frequent service, fully integrated fares and thru-running. Full fare integration would mean that city residents could use regular MetroCards to ride commuter rail lines within NYC without the payment of additional fares, and commuter rail users could transfer to city buses and subways without payment of extra fares. Regional rail

service would be greatly increased to handle the additional travelers. IRUM's plan for Regional Rail is posted on www.irum.org.

Make the Manhattan CBD Cordon Toll Plan Simpler and More Comprehensive

Many of the details of the Pilot Congestion Pricing described in NYC's Sustainability proposal must be worked out, as part of a legislative package. In particular, the goal of reducing congestion for weekday motorists must be broadened to include the much broader gains that would occur from a reduction vehicle-miles traveled in the Manhattan Central Business District (CBD) at all hours of the day and weekends as well. Relief from air and noise pollution and from the injuries and deaths resulting motor vehicles are 24/7 gains. Weekend congestion at the Lincoln and Holland Tunnels is legendary. The walking environment will be greatly enhanced with fewer vehicle-miles in the core. This will be a great benefit to businesses and residents. A sensible modification would be to simplify the Manhattan road pricing cordon to apply to all vehicles entering the Manhattan CBD – on the eight river crossings, and on all streets and highways crossing 65th Street. Setting the cordon at this location retains all of the congested Queensborough Bridge and FDR Drive interchanges within the pricing zone, providing much needed relief by reducing vehicle use at this critical bottleneck.

Medallion taxis should not be exempted from a Manhattan congesting pricing scheme. On many streets in the core of Manhattan, taxis account for than half of the vehicle flow. Cordon pricing is not an effective way to reduce excessive taxi use in the core. A surcharge on taxi fares would be more sensible. The new GPS vehicle location system now being installed on the city's medallion taxi fleet offers an efficient way to price taxi travel.

Install a Grid of Pedestrian Plazas in the Core

With less traffic clogging the Manhattan CBD's streets, a grid of pedestrian plazas can be put into place. An important first step would be to move forward with IRUM's vision42 proposal for a river-to-river auto-free light rail boulevard on 42nd Street. This proposal can be implemented quickly as an interim measure with temporary pedestrian amenities and a transitway reserved in the center for low-floor hybrid buses. With cordon pricing it also becomes feasible to permanently close to traffic the loop drives in Central Park and Prospect Park.

Finally, it is important for the legislature to understand that global warming and traffic congestion are regionwide concerns. For 25 years the NY-NJ-CT metropolitan area, the nation's largest, has been hobbled by a segmented transportation planning structure since the dissolution of the Tri-State Regional Planning Commission. NYC's Sustainability Proposal could serve as a model for a true regional plan that could result from a restored three-state sustainability planning mechanism. The legislature should consider regional solutions to this planning gap.