



A stealth toll study?

Staten Island Advance Editorial By **Staten Island Advance Editorial**

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He probably didn't mean to, but Rep. Michael Grimm dropped quite a bombshell at the meeting of the Staten Island Chamber of Commerce the other day.

The Congressman, who received an award at the gathering, complained that a consultants' study to assess the economic impact of the Port Authority's recent toll increases on Staten Island businesses is way behind schedule. And he let it be known that Port Authority Executive Director Patrick Foye, with whom Mr. Grimm met on Monday, shares his "disappointment" over the delay.

We daresay most people in the room and on Staten Island might say they were disappointed, too . . . except that, apparently, few people in the room beside Mr. Grimm were aware there was any study ongoing.

But there is indeed a \$70,000 economic impact study being jointly financed by the Port Authority and the New York Container Terminal at Howland Hook, which has been the hardest hit by the toll hike of all Staten Island businesses.

Mr. Grimm praised Mr. Foye's responsiveness and insisted, "He understands the impact of the tolls."

The first-term lawmaker added, "We need to push the consultants to get on with it, so that we can go to the governors of New York and New Jersey with the study and show them the economic impact. I believe this study will show that the tolls will put the container port out of business. That will be devastating for Staten Island and affect regional commerce."

He pledged, "I intend to keep on this. The minute you stop and let things take their course, it falls through the proverbial crack. P.A. tolls are my top priority."

We could not agree more and we certainly applaud the congressman for his determination.

However, we're still stuck on the part that such a thorough analysis has been taking place all along. Consultants, we've heard about, but a formal study?

Even more astonishing is that it's being done by two professors with no apparent connection to Staten Island. One is a professor from SUNY Maritime College in the Bronx and another from the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy on Long Island.

They were chosen by P.A. and NYCT officials. Meanwhile, Jonathan Peters, a professor of finance at the College of Staten Island, is the regionally renowned expert on transportation and tolls and a tremendous resource on these issues. He surely would have brought far more targeted insights to this endeavor.

That aside, we have to wonder what there is to study. It doesn't take a brain surgeon - or a college professor - to know that hiking tolls as steeply as the P.A. did last fall is going to do significant economic damage to businesses on an Island imprisoned by tolled bridges.

It's simple: The more it costs to ship your products to and from Staten Island locations, the more deeply it cuts into your business' bottom line. Some off-Island trucking firms have already ceased to do business at Howland Hook because of the exorbitant tolls.

Borough President James Molinaro agrees that the connection between sharply higher tolls and increased economic strain on the NYCT and other Staten Island businesses is "obvious."

He continued, "What isn't obvious is what we are going to do about it."

Clearly, Howland Hook officials trust that the professors will clinch their case against sky-high P.A. tolls.

But what about the Port Authority itself? Mr. Foye "gets it," about tolls vis-a-vis Staten Island businesses, according to Mr. Grimm. So might he use the study he's so eager to see completed to justify to his board a substantial rollback on tolls for businesses?

It remains to be seen, but from what we've seen, Mr. Foye is far more receptive to Staten Island's concerns than any of his predecessors.

So, by all means, if that's what it will take to get the P.A. to budge on this, get this study done, "get on with it," as Mr. Grimm urges, even if we all know what it will say. It could pave the way for desperately needed meaningful toll relief for Staten Island's hard-pressed businesses.

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