

Let's Make a Deal by Dan Jacoby

This week, a multi-issue agreement was reached in Albany. The agreement covers congestion pricing, campaign finance reform, long-overdue salary increases, and possibly some legislation.

The bad news is that nothing (or almost nothing) was actually accomplished.

The congestion pricing debate will shift from the usual three men in a room – plus one (Mayor Bloomberg) to a 17-member commission. This commission will “study” several alternatives, then report early next year, after which the legislature may or may not act.

Whenever political leaders don't want to take the heat for an initiative, they generally create a commission; this gives them cover, allowing them to claim that they're just following the recommendations of the experts, while they hope nobody notices who appointed the members of the commission. (Note: the difference between a “committee” and a “commission” is still a mystery, except that a “committee” is usually created to bury an issue, while a “commission” is supposed to render an “independent judgment” that just happens to coincide with what its creators wanted.)

The first fact is, congestion pricing may be exactly what this city needs. The second fact is that there are many variables in a complex plan, and nobody (outside of the mayor's handpicked study group) has had an opportunity to look at those variables. The third fact is that congestion pricing may not be what the city needs after all. It all adds up to one obvious conclusion – or at least, obvious to an unbiased observer – that the public needs time to look at the idea. So a commission is probably the right solution – for now.

The “campaign finance reform” mostly isn't. The big special interests will still be able to funnel enormous amounts of money to their favorite lackeys. People will still be allowed to contribute over five times as much to the state Comptroller as they can contribute to a candidate for President. While lobbyists will be barred from contributing to campaigns, they will still be allowed to do fundraising, which leaves a gaping loophole large enough to slide a bribe through.

Pay increases for legislators and judges won't exactly happen under this agreement either, although it's pretty certain that some agreement will be reached soon. Of course, what that agreement will be is anybody's guess.

Now for the good news: Governor Spitzer is learning how to govern.

Only a few short months after failing to steamroll over Sheldon Silver or Joe Bruno on a variety of issues, and fewer than ninety days after caving in on the budget deal, Eliot Spitzer has discovered a way of bringing his rivals for power in Albany together and reach an agreement. He has realized that in order to get anything done he must work and play well with others.

Which means that, while the latest “agreement” has very little substance, future substantial agreements are now possible.