

Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

Number 147

October 17, 1997

NEWS

Pataki Questions I-287 HOV Project

Gannett Suburban newspapers in Westchester County reported last week that Governor George Pataki was weighing the positions of officials and groups opposed to the widening of the Cross-Westchester Expressway.

The Governor told a group assembled to hear him endorse candidate Ted Dunn for Westchester County Executive that **Dunn's opposition to the project** raised economic and environmental questions the state had to consider. Pataki said he valued Dunn's thoughts on the issue.

The Governor has been hearing from citizens on the matter. Last month, the Tri-State Transportation Campaign ran a series of **television spots that urged that the project be killed**, and called on citizens to contact the Governor. Tri-State Campaign member and affiliated organizations, including Scenic Hudson, Federated Conservationists of Westchester County, local Sierra Club chapters, the Environmental Defense Fund and the Natural Resources Defense Council also issued a **mailing to over 13,000 members** in September. The letter argued that highway widening was not a sustainable solution to the Hudson Valley's transportation problems, and urged citizens to contact the Governor and other officials.

In recent weeks, the Governor and his top aides have organized briefings on the project from the State Transportation Dept. and other groups interested in the issue.

The NY State DOT, motorists associations and highway construction interests are virtually the only supporters of the project. Dunn's Democratic opponent for County Executive, Andrew Spano, also opposes the road project. Municipal governments, county legislators, newspapers and citizens groups across Rockland and Westchester Counties have called for a fresh look at transportation policy, and condemned highway expansion as a sure way to accommodate increasing gridlock and sprawl development.

Brown-Bag Lunch — Discussion of the Gowanus Tunnel Plan

Wednesday OCT 22 12:30PM

Regional Plan Association, 61 Broadway, 11 Fl.
call 212-785-8000 x309 for reservations.



Free Transfers Lead to Money Train

The Straphangers Campaign revealed this week that **burgeoning subway and bus ridership and full tax coffers** are generating a healthy operating budget surplus at the NYC Transit Authority. The news rated a front page *Daily News* report on Thursday. A following story today said the surplus could run as high as \$167 million if ridership remains at the high levels seen since July. But transit budget experts not cited in news reports said the surplus could be **as high as \$200 million** by the end of 1997, and that the cost of implementing another **10% fare discount on top** of volume fare discounts already planned would only cost the TA \$100 million – half of what the agency is likely to be holding on Dec. 31.

Public debate on spending the money is flowing as thick as rush hour Times Square station straphangers. Everyone remembers what happened last time the Transit Authority announced such abundance (\$113 million): a day later, the Giuliani Administration announced it was cutting its transit budget contribution by \$113 million.

Expect to see calls for returning money to riders and taxpayers center on a proposal for a **12-rides-for-the-price-of-10** discount. This week, an MTA committee approved the long-planned 11-for-10 Metrocard break scheduled for implementation in January. That discount is already covered in the Transit Authority budget.

City Council Speaker Peter Vallone quickly endorsed the 12-for-10 discount, pointing out that it would **return the 20% fare increase** imposed on city bus and subway riders in the fall of 1995. Suburban rail commuters are being offered a 9% discount package equal to the Metro-North and LIRR fare hikes in 1995.

Other officials also responded:

- Mayor Giuliani said he would **meet with Governor Pataki** to discuss how best to use the surplus. He suggested to the *Daily News* that some be returned to riders and some be invested in the system. A City Hall spokesperson later told *MTR* that the Mayor had no distinct leanings toward either fare reduction or better service. Deputy Mayor Rudy Washington suggested the money be returned to riders, according to news reports.
- Democratic mayoral candidate Ruth Messinger's campaign office said the budget surplus should be spent on discounts "such as Council Speaker Peter Vallone's 12-for-10 proposal." Messinger also feels a 50-cent subway fare for children traveling with parents, similar to the program the commuter railroads operate, "should

be part of that package.”

- Council member A. Gifford Miller said the “\$100 million should be used for some kind of deal” for riders who got “stuck with the bill the last time. The MTA for a long time said they couldn’t give fare incentives because it would cost too much. Now, we see that isn’t the case. For the same reasons **businesses don’t give coupons out of the goodness of their heart**, the MTA should encourage the use of transit as much as possible.” But he added that “we should not take the surplus as a sign everything is peachy with the MTA budget. The whole [MTA] capital plan is based on assumptions” which could lead to shortfalls in a couple of years.
- State Assemblywoman and staunch transit advocate Catherine Nolan said the surplus should be applied equally to fare discounts and better service.

New Buses, Old Fuel

With bus ridership climbing, the TA is **revising its bus purchase plans upwards**. Based on ridership steadily declining during the past decades, planners had projected a need for about 3,200 buses by 2001. Early Metrocard experience is now leading the TA to raise the mark to about 3,800. The fleet now at 3,855, will therefore need to replace buses it had slated for attrition.

But is transit success holding the prospect of cleaner air hostage? It doesn’t have to, but diesel appears to remain the fuel of choice for the TA — there are **no plans to buy alternate fuel buses** in the anticipated purchases. More people riding the buses and subways is “good news,” said NRDC’s Rich Kassel, “but the ridership increase shouldn’t delay the clean bus program.”

Big orders of new diesel buses fly in the face of the MTA’s January 1997 commitment to convert three depots and purchase 500 compressed natural gas (CNG) buses by 2001. NYC Transit already has a CNG refueling station at its Gleason depot in Brooklyn, and has operated 34 buses in Brooklyn since November 1995.

Transit has not yet chosen a Bronx or Manhattan depot for CNG equipment, which it had promised to do by July. In addition, the recently released MTA 1998-2002 Strategic Business plan, a high profile document that sets the tone for the direction of the agency, is silent on the Bronx/Manhattan CNG program. Manhattan, which is soon to be even further out of compliance with stricter EPA pollution rules, needs to get overall emissions down sooner rather than later. But the MTA still plans to buy 593 new diesel buses — 350 of which were approved by the MTA board in March without debate.

While the 500 buses could be seen as an opportunity to begin converting the fleet to CNG, “the MTA says it doesn’t want to expand the program until they’ve tested more of the CNG buses,” said Kassel. But he added that “buying 600 new diesel buses is a **missed opportunity** to give New Yorkers cleaner air.”



Molinari Calls for Look at Congestion Pricing

A study on the economic implications of tolls on Staten Island bridges released last week by Staten Island Borough President Guy Molinari recommends the pursuit of federal funding to study **incentive pricing on the Verrazano, Outerbridge, Goethals and Bayonne** bridges. The *Staten Island Toll Impact Study*, completed by Dr. Marilyn Rubin of John Jay College, attempts to gauge the impact of bridge tolls on Staten Island’s economy. It estimates the dollar amount businesses pay in tolls each year and makes recommendations for revising the current toll structure.

A prominent option analyzed in the study is complete elimination of the tolls. But **traffic generation** that would result from a “Staten Island Freeway” was not even considered in the study, despite the study’s indication that traffic issues are a primary concern of Staten Island businesses. The report’s premise (and interest in congestion pricing) indicates that the authors and sponsors of the study understand that **roadway travel demand is price-sensitive**. Staten Islanders should question the extent of any additional influx of autos and trucks that would occur if I-278 suddenly became one of the cheap routes through the northeast. **Big traffic increases**, especially trucks, hit I-287 in northern NJ and the lower Hudson area when the 1993 Suffern link provided a low-cost alternative to I-95.

Lost transit revenues also make toll elimination a city-wide issue, but the study does not explore this problem at all. In 1996, revenue from the Verrazano Narrows Bridge was \$178 million — **22% of total MTA Bridges and Tunnels intake**. Roughly three-quarters of MTA toll revenue goes to mass transit — the Verrazano thus produces about \$133.5 million in transit funding annually. In our discussion of the elimination of the MTA’s Cross-Bay Bridge toll last week (*MTR 146*), the Straphangers Campaign’s Gene Russianoff noted that toll reduction mania could lead to **bad decisions** that could come back to haunt the transit system and the city.

The suggestion to examine congestion pricing is the most realistic of the study’s recommendations. The study could also have looked at other options to reduce shipping and other business costs by de-congesting Staten Island highways and providing direct alternatives to long-distance trucking. A number of rail freight and intermodal shipping projects with a direct connection to Staten Island are underway now (see next page), and their economic potential deserved more analysis in Molinari’s study.

There is no need to wait for additional federal funds to get moving on an analysis of incentive pricing on Staten Island. The NYSDOT’s **Staten Island Expressway Major Investment Study** should already be looking at pricing strategies as an alternative to widening the highway and as a means to avoid construction of a



second Goethals Bridge.

At present, however, NYS DOT is undertaking the study with a fixed idea in mind (widening the highway), and seems bent on **re-creating the political quagmire**

Howland Hook Rail: No Fast Track

Rail access to Staten Island's Howland Hook Marine Terminal will not be implemented this year, and **could be delayed until the end of 1998**. Rail lines on S.I.'s north shore, that could connect to NJ and points west and south via the Arthur Kill lift bridge, are supposed to provide shippers at Howland Hook with an alternative to trucking goods over the Goethals Bridge. NYC Economic Development Corporation and other officials confirmed the delay at a Staten Island rail forum this week.

Re-opening the lift bridge and the Staten Island portion of the rail lines, an EDC project, has been pushed back from Dec., 1997 to the beginning of April, 1998. Repair work on the New Jersey side has **yet to even start**. According to Union County, a needs assessment currently underway must be completed before rehabilitation of the trackage between the Arthur Kill bridge lift and Cranford Junction can begin.

Railroads Wring Hands: Town Shows How It's Done

This week the Township of Maplewood announced plans to **expand its train station shuttle** service (see *MTR* 143), made possible by the State's offer of three jitney mini-buses (two of them fueled by natural gas). The Tri-State Transportation Campaign had urged the Governor's Office to provide the alt-fuel vehicles, while

Gowanus Groups Await Community Engineer

Two years ago, the Gowanus Expressway Community Coalition asked the NY State Dept. of Transportation to provide a **community engineer**. Civic groups in the coalition felt technical guidance through the complexities of the \$1 billion Gowanus Expressway reconstruction slated to take place in their midst was imperative.

NY State DOT rejected the request, saying retention of community engineers was not its policy for any project. DOT said the presence of a community engineer increases the likelihood of conflict, and that it implied DOT's community outreach is inadequate.

But the story of the Gowanus reconstruction is already one of protracted conflict between communities and the state, and the DOT's relationship to the communities is badly flawed.

Thus, Brooklyn Borough President Howard Golden agreed to hire and pay a community engineer to be an "honest broker" to clarify information and shed light on differing perspectives. Unfortunately, a **request for proposals** for such a position has **never been drawn up**. The engineer is needed now to help community groups with the environmental review process, which for such a huge project can prove baffling. The exact cause of the delay is unclear, but Brooklyn civic leaders are growing increasingly concerned.

it has created in Brooklyn with its inflexible approach to the Gowanus Expressway reconstruction. DOT will likely be hearing a lot more on the content of its Staten Island study in the near future.

The agencies say getting the infrastructure projects done isn't pressing this winter because selection of an operator for the line has been suspended in light of the pending CSX and Norfolk Southern division of Conrail. The two railroads have expressed interest in operating the line through a shared-assets corporation. The parties responsible for choosing an operator are the Port Authority, NYC EDC, and Union County. But the decision on the Conrail deal, barring appeals, is due in June, 1998. Hopefully, the **target dates** for the lift bridge and the rail line **will stop moving** before then.

Growth prospects for Howland Hook terminal, which has reached annual container volumes of 80,000 in its first year, are **already constrained** by the lack of rail access. Meanwhile, any new business at the port will involve still more goods being shipped out by truck over Staten Island's and New Jersey's congested highways.

Congressman Bill Pascrell had requested the third bus from NJTransit. The *Star Ledger* lauded the Maplewood program, along with the recently initiated "Loop" jitney service connecting the new NJ Performing Arts Center in Newark with the city's train stations, calling them "people-moving solutions that help accentuate the positive in their towns." The Rutgers Environmental Law Clinic's Therese Langer was cited in a *Ledger* piece, saying the minibuses transit links are "**what transportation reform is all about.**"

The Maplewood story provided a welcome antidote to last week's *NY Times* metro front page article bemoaning the fate of the region's suburban commuters unable to find train station parking spaces. Adopting the **windshield perspective of the region's transit planners**, the article failed to look beyond parking expansion for a solution to the problem. But it did correctly note that shortage of space for surface lots and local opposition to parking decks severely constrain parking expansion. The *Times*, and the Metro-North planners it cited, offered no solution at all.

The Bergen *Record* also addressed the subject this week, reporting that NJTransit seeks to build 2,500 to 4,000 new parking spaces in anticipation of the opening of the Secaucus Transfer in 2002, allowing riders on the Bergen, Main and Pascack Valley Lines to travel di-



rectly into NY Penn Station. The town of Woodcliff Lake on the Pascack line has already unanimously **rejected NJTransit's proposal to add spaces**, saying that more parking would add to existing congestion problems.

None of the region's commuter railroad seems concerned that the push for parking can **sacrifice a train station's status as a boon** to quality of life and sensible land planning. In areas of high population density, improvements to the walking and cycling environment and feeder services such as those found in Maplewood, White Plains and the Bronx deserve attention and funding from transit agencies. Instead, rail operators abandon neighborhood stations in favor of high-volume, park-only sites. A few years ago, Metro-North closed the Hudson Line's Montrose and Crugers stations near built-up areas, and relocated them to the new Cortland Station — out in the woods with lots of new parking. Similarly, NJTransit has declined to provide direct Manhattan service to three stations in or near urban areas, where over 55% of passengers walk to the train, in order to speed passengers from further flung stations, with higher rates of auto access, to New York.

While residents of more remote areas may now delight in transit agencies' eagerness to lure them to the train, these areas are equally ill-served by the policy of parking for all. A rail line to which everyone drives **promotes sprawl** just as a new highway does in a developing area. The region's rail operators should take a hint from towns like Maplewood and go back to designing service for people, not cars.

Slowing Somerset

Somerset County, NJ is seeking a consultant to recommend ways to apply traffic calming techniques to local and county roads. The analysis, to begin in the next few months, may recommend specific sites for treatment. "The basic premise is to **slow down cars through the design of the road** rather than through enforcement," Jack Molenaar, the county's principal transportation planner, told the *Courier News*.

Unfortunately, that paper followed up the announcement with an editorial doubting whether traffic calming efforts were worthwhile on clogged Somerset roads — essentially writing off the future of the area it serves.

At least one Somerset town, Rocky Hill, is already leading a fight to calm an arterial highway. Governor Whitman agreed recently to reduce speed limits on Route 518. Now Rocky Hill wants more sidewalks and crosswalks on the route (see *MTR* 141).

Mobilizing the Region is a weekly publication of the Tri-State Transportation Campaign, available by fax or electronic mail. The Campaign was formed in 1993 by 14 leading public interest organizations dedicated to restructuring transportation policy, infrastructure and choices to promote environmental health and sustainability, economic efficiency and social equity in the 32-county region in and surrounding NYC, from Trenton to Hartford. We invite organizations that agree with our general orientation to join the Campaign as affiliates.

MTR#147. Contributing: Elizabeth Ernish, Therese Langer, Bill Yates Editors: Jon Orcutt, Alec Merber. Executive Director, Janine Bauer

CALENDAR

OCT 20 5PM Public Hearing on proposed Metro-North/LIRR fare changes. MTA HQ, 347 Madison Ave., 5th Fl. Bd. Rm., New York, 212-878-7483 to register to speak.

OCT 22 12:30PM RPA Brown-Bag Lunch on the Gowanus Tunnel, 61 Broadway, 11 Fl. 212-785-8000 x309 for reservations.

OCT 22 5:30PM NYC Transit Rider's Council, 1997 President's Forum at MTA HQ, 347 Madison Ave., 5th Fl. Bd. Room. 212-878-7087

OCT 22 NJ Planning Commission monthly meeting. 609-292-7156 to confirm time, place, topics.

OCT 23 NOON NYC Transit Rider's Council. MTA Hq., 347 Madison Ave, 7th Fl, NY, 212-878-7087

OCT 24 9:30AM Visiting Scholars Seminar: "Travel Behavior and Public Policy," Alan Pisarski. At 1 World Trade Ctr., 43rd Fl., 212-650-8050

OCT 25 8:45AM-2PM Association of New Jersey Environmental Commissions (ANJEC) 24th Annual Enviro Congress: "Save Our Lands, Save Our Towns." At Rutgers University, Busch Campus, Piscataway NJ. \$35, members, \$50, non-members (includes lunch). 973-539-7547

OCT 26-29 "Rail-Volution '97: Building Livable Communities with Transit." St. Louis, Missouri. Includes: Linking Transit and Land Use, Building Citizen and Institutional Support. \$295. To register, call 800-788-7077 by Sept. 26, Rail-Volution '97, Hudson Cross Roads, Selbyville, DE 19975 or fax 302-436-1911.

OCT 27 6PM "Columbus Circle: Above and Below" lecture by John West. Transportation Alternatives, 115 W. 30 St, Rm. 1207, NY, 212-475-3394

OCT 28 12:30PM-2PM Dept. of City Planning "Brown Bag Lunch" with James Harris, Exec. Dir. NYMTC. At Spector Hall, 22 Reade Street, NY Info: 212-442-4630.

OCT 29 7PM Manhattan Community Bd. 8 Pedestrian Safety Forum with Council members Andrew Eristoff and Gifford Miller. At Hunter College, 129 E. 79 St., Manhattan. 212-427-4840

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



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