

Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

Number 171

May 1, 1998

We were unable to publish MTR last week — we offer a slightly expanded edition this week.

NEWS

New Jersey Ponders Post-HOV Future

NJ officials have already begun to discuss how to abandon the carpool, or “high-occupancy” vehicle (HOV) lanes it has constructed on **I-80 and I-287**. Because the highway facilities were built with federal funds explicitly as carpool lanes, **opening the lanes to general traffic** would require the state to pay the federal government back for its share of the projects’ costs, or else receive a payback waiver from the Federal Highway Administration or Congress, depending on who authorized a particular project.

New Jersey officials, such as Deputy Assembly Speaker Alex DeCrose and Morris County transportation chief Frank Reilly, were cited in a front-page *Star Ledger* piece yesterday saying NJ should begin to seek such a waiver now — they are already convinced that **low carpool traffic** to date on I-80 and I-287 spells ultimate doom for the lanes and are under pressure from car commuters stuck in traffic next to the sparsely used HOV lanes.

But NJDOT and federal highway officials say they cannot even begin to evaluate the efficacy of these HOV lanes until they are **connected into a “system”** by a massive, \$56 million HOV-only flyover interchange at the highways’ intersection in Parsipanny. That project won’t be done until 2003.

The **rolling justification for HOV lane construction** — that low-usage carpool lanes will work better if only we build even more of them — is an astounding display of official hubris in the face of strong empirical evidence that HOV lanes are the wrong road for the metropolitan

region (this logic is at work on Long Island as well as in New Jersey).

But federal highway officials should not let New Jersey or other HOV builders off the hook easily. States seeking to abandon HOV lanes should be compelled to use the dedicated lanes to experiment with **incentive pricing policies** as congestion management tools and a means of generating infrastructure dollars. Towns along failing HOV corridors should also be required to develop “maintenance of capacity” policy packages, especially **land use** measures designed to **limit future traffic growth**, before receiving any federal payback waivers.

Failed HOV lanes in San Diego and Houston have already been converted into “high-occupancy toll” lanes that permit free carpool passage but require others to pay. San Diego has just opened a new system that varies tolls continuously in response to varying traffic congestion levels. Motorists are advised of the conditions and toll levels by radio and other means.

This is not to say that the region’s agencies should hatch new highway widening projects with “high-occupancy toll” schemes in mind. Indeed, the NYS DOT should call off HOV construction plans for Queens, Staten Island and elsewhere. Developing pricing policies for **existing roads** would likely induce more of an “HOV” effect than all of the pavement and hundreds of millions of dollars the agencies have poured into HOV lane planning and construction. But the public should get something for the investment that’s been thrown into existing HOV lanes. If the latter can be used to help introduce incentive toll policies to the region, they may yet serve a positive purpose.

City Leaders Affirm Opposition to Long Island Expressway Widening

At a “town hall” meeting Wednesday night in Bayside, Queens, **Mayor Rudolph Giuliani** said his administration would continue to fight NY State’s plan to build **new carpool lanes** along the LIE in Queens east of the Cross Island Parkway.

Last week, NYC **Comptroller Alan Hevesi** wrote to Governor Pataki, again imploring the state to call off the highway widening project. Hevesi questioned state assertions that the new lanes would relieve congestion or reduce air pollution, and called for operational improve-

Regional Plan Association 8th Annual Regional Assembly

Tuesday, May 5 7:30am-2:30pm

Sheraton New York Hotel & Towers, 7th Avenue at 52nd Street, NYC, Imperial Ballroom B

Featured speaker:

New Jersey Governor Christine Whitman

Workshops on:

Suburban highway issues, the “Nassau Hub,” regional rail strategies, brownfield redevelopment

To obtain a registration form and information on fees, call 212-253-2727 x309 Or find a form and program at www.rpa.org

ments to the LIE/Cross Island Parkway interchange and several exits instead of the addition of new travel lanes. Hevesi stated, “In light of the **opposition of numerous City officials**, including the Mayor and the Queens Borough President, I fail to understand why the State is continuing to pursue this project.”

The widening project is immensely unpopular in eastern Queens, where residents and officials believe the new lanes will increase the amount of through traffic using their neighborhoods as corridors between Long Island and NYC. Opposition to the project is growing throughout **the rest of Queens** as well, because the State is preparing a study of the LIE from the Nassau line to the East River, which will also consider various carpool lane options. Central and western Queens communities reason that if the new lanes do not enter Queens at all, they won't be extended across the borough.

Stealth Lanes for Staten Island ?

The Campaign has learned that the NY State DOT plans to spend almost **\$60 million** to add “**quick-fix**” carpool, or “high-occupancy” vehicle (HOV) lanes to portions of the congested Staten Island Expressway. The project, included in a list of regional transportation program amendments circulated by the DOT this week, has been in the works for months, despite the fact that a long-term plan to relieve the SIE corridor has been underway for about a year and is halfway to completion.

The lanes DOT is considering would be constructed by **incorporating shoulders** into the highway's travel area, or by **paving the median**, or both. They would be on the highway's eastern end, between Clove Road and the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge.

DOT officials stress that the project has not yet taken definite shape, and that options remain open. For instance, the shoulder lanes near the Verrazano could act as **bottleneck jumps for buses** rather than as car lanes.

Pro-transit measures like this should receive strong priority over the addition of road capacity that will only mainline more cars into New York City.

If the DOT is bent on fast-tracking carpool lanes, and is able to overcome opposition to them, it will still have to explain how its longer-term “major investment study” (MIS) for the Expressway **can remain unprejudiced** once the quickie lanes are built. From the beginning, abundant signs have shown that the DOT knows where it wants the MIS to end up — recommending construction of new carpool lanes on both sides of the SIE.

But also during the course of the study, many Staten Island citizens have spoken out against adding lanes, concerned that doing so would draw more through traffic and worsen congestion on the SIE, and underscoring the Island's serious **public transit deficit**. We hope the fast-track project doesn't make a mockery of the time officials and



Toolbox

Video Review

Buying Time

The Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota has performed an important service for policy makers and transportation reform advocates with its production of *Buying Time*, a 14-minute video that introduces the theory and practice of **congestion relief toll policies** to general American audiences.

The piece approaches motorists on their own ground, spending its first five minutes addressing the causes and costs of traffic congestion. It argues that in general, our roadway systems can handle all but peak-period demand. But the social and other costs of urban highway construction have become prohibitive, so that it is unlikely that we can ever build our way out of congestion. *Buying Time* demonstrates, with a water drain analogy, how a **small percentage reduction** in peak traffic volume and effectively unclog key roadways.

The video places premium charges for peak hour roadway use in the context of the many other services or industries that **vary pricing according to demand**, and notes that electronic toll collection methods make variable roadway tolls highly feasible and convenient.

Persuasive testimonials from commuters tell stories about the personal costs of congestion and their relief due to innovations like Orange County, CA's new SR91 toll lanes. A San Diego municipal official explains that revenues from a new “high-occupancy toll (HOT)” lane — which drivers use free if they carpool, but must **pay to use** if driving alone — are devoted to expansion of the city's bus system.

Interestingly, most of the functioning pricing schemes shown are such HOT lanes, developed upon the failure of expensive new lanes built to encourage carpooling. When the restricted lanes proved unable to attract significant numbers of carpools, they were opened up to general traffic — for a fee.

Transportation officials in the Tri-State region would do well to use *Buying Time* to present innovative toll policies to the public and elected officials, especially in connection with the various “major investment studies” agencies like NY State DOT are undertaking. As communities and their elected officials increasingly reject expansion of highway capacity, the region will be forced to find ways to use highways more efficiently. If we can, we will get more value from the massive public investment the highway network represents.

Copies of the video are \$10. **Contact:** 612-626-0347, tbecker@hhh.umn.edu <http://www.hhh.umn.edu/Centers/SLP/Conpric/conpric.htm>

citizens have put into the MIS and other meetings with the DOT, and that the near-term measures will be subject to an open public discussion.



NY State DOT in fact agreed in recent weeks to several changes that will improve its Staten Island Expressway

Major Investment Study. The DOT has told the Campaign it will develop traffic volume projections that include **induced demand**—the added vehicular traffic that will be drawn to use the expressway if it is widened. DOT also agreed to analyze packages of alternatives that do not include the **addition of lanes**, HOV or otherwise, and will produce traffic reduction estimates for non-truck freight movement strategies.

But the State DOT refuses to budge on congestion relief pricing. Despite incentive toll policies' strong potential to reduce peak traffic volumes on Staten Is-

land's bridges, the DOT seems averse to even discussing pricing options. This is unfortunate in light of growing support for such analysis. Four elected officials and 10 Staten Island citizens groups have called for consideration of pricing as part of the long term study, and a toll study commissioned by Staten Island Borough President Guy Molinari recommended a pricing study as well. The Department should acknowledge the public input it has received and agree to fully analyze congestion relief pricing in its SIE major investment study.

Car-Ban Crowd Swamps Borough Hall

Approximately 500 citizens filled Brooklyn Borough Hall last Tuesday evening with demands that **Prospect Park's loop roadway be closed to auto traffic**.

The hearing was convened by Brooklyn Borough President Howard Golden in response to ongoing citizen calls to make the park a car-free oasis amid New York City's most populous borough. Golden has no direct power to make policy about the road, which is the province of NYC's parks and transportation departments. But the Borough President is interested in developing policy recommendations on the matter, and thus took the highly commendable step of opening his doors to public input — Golden heard testimony until at least 10:00pm.

Attendees said only a handful of the hundreds of speakers favored preserving traffic access to the park. The car-free crowd was mixed racially and generationally — many parents brought children to underscore the need for safe recreational space in the city.

The issue has gained urgency in recent weeks as Golden agreed to hold the hearing, and because Stephen DiBrienza, the City Council member representing Park Slope, called last week for the park to be completely **closed to traffic during July and August** (see *MTR* #169). DiBrienza argues his proposal takes advantage of lower summer traffic to minimize any impacts from the closure, provides a car-free park during the best outdoor weather and will allow the city to examine the closure's effects. If tested, the summer closure could become a regular feature of the park's traffic regime. If impacts appear minimal, the trial could provide the basis for eliminating all park traffic for good.

Transportation Alternatives and its well organized Brooklyn committee have waged a tenacious organizing campaign for a car-free Prospect Park.

The most significant issue regarding the park's closure to traffic is a lingering community fear that **streets around the park will be impacted** by additional cars.

"Gridlock" Sam Schwarz, city traffic expert, former NYC DOT Deputy Commissioner and Flatbush resident said in testimony read at the hearing that plans executed in the 1980s to close some park exits and entrances

generated predictions of bad traffic consequences that proved unfounded. He also detailed likely diversion routes for park traffic if Prospect Park was fully closed to traffic, explaining that **surrounding streets could handle the resulting flows**. Schwarz said he fully supported the proposed summer closure of the park.

Others said acting decisively to recover urban space taken over by cars is the only alternative to succumbing completely to increasing traffic. "A car-free Prospect Park is part of the solution to too many cars in the city," said Transportation Alternatives' Elizabeth Ernish.

Lev Fruchter, a student whose mother, Rachel Fruchter, was killed bicycling last year by a speeding van that was **illegally present in Prospect Park**, criticized the NYPD's sloppy enforcement of existing regulations governing cars in the park, and lambasted the risk-averse mentality among the police, Parks Dept. and NYC DOT that makes positive change — and even common sense safety improvements — so difficult and time consuming.

Open Port Authority Bill Gets a Start in Albany

State Senator John Marchi and State Assemblyman Albert Vann, chairs of the New York state legislature's committees overseeing public authorities, have introduced a bill that would mandate a public speaking segment at Port Authority board meetings and **release of agendas** well in advance of the meetings.

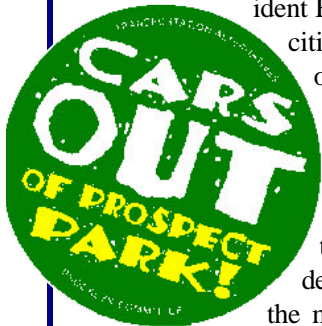
Presently, PA board and some committee meetings are open to the public, but **public input is strictly controlled** and generally is permitted **after** Port Authority board members vote on action items. It is also impossible to learn the content of meeting agendas in advance.

"There is a strained definition of 'open' meetings being applied by the Port Authority," Senator Marchi said this week in a release.

The Campaign's Bill Yates detailed the Catch-22 nature of participating in PA proceedings in a February *Daily News* opinion piece (see *MTR* #163). Yates said part of the PA's public relations problem is that its **decisions are extremely remote** from the public.

Yates told the Staten Island *Advance* that Port Authority rules that schedule public speaking after its board members have already voted are "preposterous."

The Senate bill is S.7330. An Assembly bill number is being assigned.



Pataki's Vetoes: Transport's Toll

The line-item vetoes Governor Pataki leveled at the NY Legislature's budget this week hit several **worthwhile transit provisions**. They were:

- \$7 million for NYC Transit to restore or add to levels of **subway and bus service**.
- \$3 million added by the Legislature to ensure the presence of a **subway conductor** on any train longer than two cars. The provision was to head off Transit's "one-person train operation" (OPTO) program.
- \$2 million to **reinstate clerks** at Long Island Railroad and Metro-North **stations** where staffed positions were previously eliminated.

OPTO foes were dismayed by the moves. Brooklyn State Senator Seymour Lachman said the Governor's veto of the conductor funds is "a potentially dangerous decision for passengers."

Transit advocates had also counted on the \$7 million for service, arguing that despite booming subway and bus ridership, NYC Transit service levels have not increased to meet the rider increases.

Governor Pataki also axed a **\$60 million pot** for "intermodal transportation projects" that were to be specified later by individual legislators, and similarly chopped out a \$90 million increase in **local highway funding**, arguing that roads were adequately provided for in his \$13 billion 5-year highway capital plan.

A Queens Rail Renaissance ?

Long Island Railroad began public presentations this week of its East Side Access study of **linking the railroad to Grand Central Terminal**. LIRR predicts the connection will save 78,000 East Side commuters (30,000 of them new riders) about 30 minutes per day.

Best of all, the additional station capacity opened up to LIRR by the new connection will afford big **increases in service frequency**. Planners at a presentation Wednesday estimated service at some eastern Queens stations, including along the Port Washington line, will be up as much as 75%, while other stations in Queens will see around a 33% hike. When asked if the projections meant **an end to LIRR station closings** in Queens, officials said they couldn't make any promises, but said that projections for the LIRR-Grand Central project were based on continued operation of all stations in use today.

Present schedules have LIRR trains rolling into Grand Central in 2010.

A Transit Project for CT ?

In the wake of the Griffin Light Rail line's demise at its hand, ConnDOT may be eager to show it isn't entirely possessed by a "pave all" mentality.

Earlier this month, ConnDOT told the Capitol Region Council of Governments it had decided **not to add a fourth lane to I-84** west of Hartford, but would look instead at bus, light rail or commuter rail development in the corridor. Evaluation of these options will last into next year. *Courant*

Around the Region



➤ The Bergen *Record* announced today that 12 **Passaic and Bergen County** municipalities would get over \$500,000 in state grants to improve pedestrian environments around schools. The grants are from a \$1.5 million local aid pedestrian safety fund recently established by NJ DOT.

➤ NYC Public Advocate Mark Green attacked the MTA's record providing service to the disabled last week, citing **NYC Transit** documents showing poor "**Access-a-Ride**" service response to requests for pickups as well as lousy on-time performance. In March, Access-a-Ride refused to pick up 19.6% of requests for inter-borough rides. Transit officials say demand for the service is growing fast, and that it's difficult to keep pace with the highly individual type of requests the service gets. Nonetheless, Green has filed a civil rights complaint with the FTA, asking the agency to help improve performance in NYC.

➤ Connecticut is paying for a \$300 million upgrade of the catenary (overhead power cable) system along most of the the rail line between **NYC and New Haven**. The investment is primarily a Metro-North project, but it will enable Amtrak's pending fast Boston-NYC service to maintain high speeds west of New Haven. The antiquated catenaries now routinely slow and sometimes even foul trains on the line. CT's Stamford station rehab project also has measures to accommodate the planned high-speed rail service (see MTR #119).

➤ The FAA has approved the **City of Newark's** proposed pedestrian link between the new Newark Airport Northeast Corridor rail station and the site of a new convention center the city wants built nearby. The OK comes with the foolish proviso that the walkway cannot be used to reach NJ Transit or Amtrak trains, only the airport monorail. The problem supposedly stems from regulations surrounding the FAA-sanctioned funding being used for the airport rail. One reading of the rules is that the funds can only be used for strictly airport related transportation.

➤ NJ Transit officials are trying to sell **Sparta residents (Sussex County)** on the idea of a rail yard to serve its proposed commuter rail service on the NY Susquehanna & Western rail line. Some residents are wary of noise and pollution from the yard, while others question whether NJ Transit needs to build several rail lines into northwestern NJ. Transit is also considering reopening the nearby "Lackawanna Cutoff," which would carry commuters from northeastern Pennsylvania through Sussex and Warren Counties to New York City. If they move forward, both lines would begin operation early in the next decade.

States' Rail Rights

U.S. Reps and Senators now trying to reconcile their versions of ISTEA-2 are debating flexibility for states to spend federal funds on Amtrak services. The Senate version allows states to do this from certain funding programs. The provision would be a great leveler for states that find rail projects less attractive than highways because at present, state investment in Amtrak service,

unlike state spending on roads, is unmatched by federal aid. ISTEA eligibility for state contributions to Amtrak could spur strategic investment in rail corridors important to specific states. New York, for instance, spends state funds on Empire service between Buffalo, Albany and NYC.

This should be a no-brainer, since it expands states' choices but mandates nothing.

More Pieces of Mayor's Traffic Program

New York City's Taxi and Limousine Commission announced **new regulations** designed to **rein in dangerous and erratic taxi behavior** this week. The new rules include steep increases in fines for many infractions, probationary periods for new drivers, stricter guidelines for suspension or revocation of taxi licenses and higher insurance requirements. Passengers, safety advocates and even some cab drivers cited in news reports supported the changes. Some observers urged cabbies to use the new rules to refuse to accommodate **dangerous passenger behavior**, like hailing cabs in the middle of the street, which factors significantly in erratic taxi movements or stops. They also urged police to enforce rules against such passengers.

The city also announced it would expand its **red light camera program**, after the Mayor and City Council approved a local law increasing the maximum number of the cameras to 50. NYC DOT statistics show that light-running had dropped 30% in intersections where the cameras are already deployed.

State law limits the number of cameras to 50, and a city law had further limited them to 25. Both state and city leaders should continue working to **ease such restrictions** and expand the automated traffic law enforcement program several-fold.

NY State Assembly Public Hearing

"Bus Service in New York City"

May 14, 10am

270 Broadway 11th floor

Corporations Committee

Commission on Critical Transportation Choices

212-674-5153 518-455-5897

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



Mobilizing the Region

Visit the Tri-State Transportation Campaign Web Site
<http://www.tstc.org>

— Job Announcement — Tri-State Transportation Campaign New Jersey coordinator

The Campaign needs an energetic staff member who is committed to public policy advocacy and grassroots organizing, communicates well verbally and in writing and is familiar with New Jersey.

Send resume and writing sample to:

Tri-State Transportation Campaign
281 Park Ave. South, NYC 10010
fax: 212-777-8157 e-mail tstc@tstc.org

CALENDAR

MAY 5 7:30am Regional Plan Association's 8th Regional Assembly: "Creating the Capacity for Growth." 212-253-2727 x309 or www.rpa.org
RPA has announced Governor Christine Whitman will deliver keynote address.

MAY 6 10am Advisory committee to new NYC Dept. of City Planning projects: "Making Streets Safe for Cycling" and "Bicycle Parking Needs Study." 22 Reade St., Manhattan 212-442-4711

MAY 7 8:30am-5pm Conference — "CEQR and Land Use: Is it Broken?" NYC environmental review and land use issues. NYC Bar Assn. 42 West 44th Street, Manhattan. 212-683-0023. Register by 4/27.

MAY 8-14 Tour de Sol electric vehicle championship, NYC-Washington D.C. Expos in NYC, Morristown, Princeton and Westhampton, NJ. Conference on hybrid electrics May 7-8. Call 413-774-6051.

MAY 14 10am NY State Assembly hearing on NYC bus service. 270 Broadway, 11th floor, Manhattan. 518-455-5897.

May 15 Noon City Club of NY luncheon panel on NY hub port development. W/ Janine Bauer, Tri-State Campaign, reps from NYC EDC, Port Authority and Global Terminal. CUNY Grad Center, 33 W. 42nd St., 18th fl. Manhattan 212-664-0954.

May 19 6-8pm Auto-Free NY: "Progress Report on E-Z Pass." Parvis Mehran, MTA Bridges and Tunnels. At Transportation Alternatives, 115 W. 30th St., #1207 Manhattan. 212-475-3394.

June 16-18 NY Public Transit Association spring conference and trade show. Westchester Marriot, Tarrytown. 518-434-9060.

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