

Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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NEWS

NJ Gas Tax: Sprawl or Sensible Transport ?

Governor Whitman's efforts to raise the New Jersey gas tax continue to get rough political treatment in Trenton, while the Tri-State Campaign's position on the gas tax gains ground.

The Governor proposes to increase the state gas tax by 5 cents. The revenue would flow to the NJ Transportation Trust Fund, which finances transportation capital projects. The Campaign argues that because NJ DOT uses a **high percentage of its resources to build and widen highways**, fueling car dependence and destructive sprawl development, any new Trust Fund revenues should have **conditions** attached to them. These are:

- ❖ The percentage of Trust Fund revenues devoted to **aid to counties and municipalities** for road repairs (which should relieve property taxes) should be doubled.
- ❖ DOT and highway authorities should be **prohibited** from building **new highway lanes** in State Plan areas 4 ("rural farmland") and 5 ("environmentally sensitive").
- ❖ DOT spending on **new highway capacity** should be limited to **10%** of state and federal funds in any year.
- ❖ DOT should be required to bring the road and bridge system into a **state of good repair** within five years.
- ❖ Spend an extra \$100 million annually on **sidewalks, bikeways and local transit** services to give people more options, and for **rail freight** improvements to reduce trucks. These areas get less than \$12 million now.

The central NJ *Courier-News* backed these principles in a June 21 editorial. "...**limits on new highway construction should be adopted** as part of the trust fund's restoration...the Governor will find it easier to win the votes she needs to get the 5-cent gas-tax hike on the ballot if...sensible planning principles are adopted for all trust fund projects," wrote the paper. Interest in this approach on the part of legislative leaders is growing.

Still, legislative support for the gas tax seems far from assured at present. At the end of last week, news reports said Governor Whitman and the legislature had agreed to raise the gas tax by 4-cents over several years.

But subsequent reports say legislative backing for the tax hike has become enmeshed in a battle between the Governor and the major state employees' union over layoffs. The union has apparently succeeded in enlisting the legislature to its cause, and word is out that lawmaker support for the gas tax could be contingent upon the Governor retreating from her layoff plan.

Feds Reject Connecticut Route 6 Scheme

— **ConnDOT Plan is Dead, But Gov. Vows to Build** —

Last week, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers concluded that Connecticut DOT's proposal to build a **Route 6 expressway east of Hartford** did not meet Clean Water Act guidelines. The Corps denied the state a permit it needs to build the highway, dooming the particular alternative favored by the state. The decision is a major victory for civic activists, local officials and CT environmentalists who had resisted the road plan for years.

Expressway opponents contend the project will promote **traffic growth and sprawl development**, as well as destroy significant areas of natural habitat.

For the past 33 years, the state has sought to build an east-west highway between Hartford and Providence. ConnDOT's "Alternative 133A" would have extended the I-384 spur from Hartford as a four lane highway through forests and farms that bypassed town centers. The plan would required the **largest wetlands fill** in New England in over a decade and would have cost an estimated \$260 million.

In their drive to get the big construction project under way, Conn DOT and Governor Rowland sought to steamroll opposition from local interests and elected leaders and the US EPA and Fish and Wildlife Service officials. Some of Route 6's opponents had coalesced around a proposal developed by Connecticut Fund for the Environment (CFE) to **upgrade the existing Route 6** to eliminate the safety hazards and other problems along the route.

The Army Corp of Engineers said Alternative 133A would fragment wetlands and water resources, splitting up habitats which should remain as intact natural habitat, and said the state had not developed a sufficiently thorough or specific wetlands mitigation plan.

The Hartford *Courant* reported Thursday that the Corps' ruling said that upgrading the existing roadway would not be a sufficient solution to problems identified by ConnDOT. However, analysis of the Corps' decision shows that **no decision** about the **practicality of the upgrade** was made because the Corps ruling did not attempt to pass judgement on other proposed alternatives.

While local officials said the decision should lead ConnDOT and Governor Rowland to "throw in the towel" on the Route 6 expressway, it was unclear that they would do so. The Governor's office told the *Courant* that Rowland was still committed to building a

new highway through that part of the state, and that ConnDOT would “investigate all of its options.” The

state has long refused to include the upgrade alternative in its environmental impact studies, (see *MTR* #46).

15% off for Turnpike Trucks

In August, the New Jersey Turnpike Authority will begin to offer **15% off-peak toll discounts** to trucking companies with Turnpike toll accounts. The Authority’s aim is to reduce rush hour congestion and to **get some trucks off of smaller highways** like Rte 1 and Rte 31.

It is unknown whether the policy will have the desired effect. Fortunately, the program is being implemented as a **six-month test** (beginning August 1). Incentive toll policies are relatively new, and this will be their first trial in New Jersey.

Off-peak toll discount programs known to the Campaign include those on the Maine Turnpike, truck toll discounts on the Pennsylvania Turnpike and on two bridges in Lee County, Florida. Information on these new programs is sparse, although a recent *Transportation Quarterly* article reviewed **data from Maine** in 1995 and 1996 and **found little effect on traffic** (ME Turnpike congestion stems from weekend recreational trips).

In contrast, the Tappan Zee Bridge, where **trucks** now pay a **peak period toll premium**, was the only crossing between the Goethals and the Beacon-Newburgh bridges to show fewer truck crossings in 1997 than in 1996.

The NJ Turnpike policy is part of a growing wave of toll-cut proposals in the metropolitan region. In recent remarks, both Governor Whitman and Mayor Giuliani and their representatives have expressed a clear preference for toll discounts over peak-period toll premiums. However, no state or municipal jurisdiction, nor any regional agency in the Tri-State area, has adopted anything resembling a coherent plan for coping with bur-

geoning traffic and congestion. Leaders are reaching for off-peak toll discounts as a new, pain-free approach. Will it work?

The Turnpike’s 6-month experiment should provide some insight, though toll hikes in the early 1990s were **not the only factor** driving trucks from the Turnpike. The link up of I-287 in New Jersey to the NY Thruway completed a beltway (with few tolls) around New York City — many of the trucks that have swarmed Route 31 and other NJ state roads are heading for I-287, and it’s unclear that cheaper Turnpike tolls will bring them back.

Analyses of transportation pricing issues by the MTA, NY State and City agencies, and the NJ Turnpike will likely be released in the next few years. These studies could benefit from the Turnpike’s 1998-99 experiment, and further reflect on the efficacy of off-peak toll cuts. It’s possible that truck toll discounts will combine with

other factors that disadvantage alternative freight transport and serve to simply **increase regional truck traffic**.

Presently, more than 24 million trucks per year use the NJ Turnpike. When asked if the Turnpike expected to lose money by reducing tolls from \$18.20 to \$15.47 for a full 122-mile drive, a spokesperson said it will lose \$3 million dollars a year if no additional trucks use the highway. But if half of the trucks that left in 1991 (when tolls nearly doubled) return, the Turnpike will make money.



Who Likes Trucks ?

Central NJ’s *Courier-News* reports that the NJ DOT gets **more complaints about trucks on local roads** than about any other issue. “Route 31 is dangerous because it’s so rutted,” said one East Amwell resident.

Transportation Alternatives, which coordinates a NYC-wide forum of civic groups concerned with traffic issues called the Neighborhood Streets Network, says that inappropriate **truck traffic on local streets tops the list** of many communities’ traffic complaints.

Bronx and Brooklyn neighborhoods up in arms about **new garbage transfer stations** and their **fleets of trucks** may be the achilles’ heel of New York City plans to shut down its Fresh Kills landfill by 2002. In the Bronx’ Hunts Point, a community where residential and industrial land uses have grown too close for comfort, civic groups and local students are **monitoring truck traffic** this summer to document truck volumes and violations of city-established truck routes

Truck reduction plan of the Country Roads Coalition, an alliance of citizens and local officials in along NJ’s Mercer-Hunterdon county line.

The state should:

- Remove Routes 518 and 31 from the list of designated truck routes.
- Encourage trucks to return to the NJ Turnpike with toll and other incentives
- Open the Garden State Parkway to truck traffic
- Restrict truck traffic on Rtes 31 and 518 to local deliveries and a weight limit of 4 tons.
- Increase enforcement of speed and weight limits.

Green Light for Brooklyn Traffic Calming

This week, NYC DOT quietly announced the award of the consulting contract for the “Downtown Brooklyn Area-wide Traffic Calming Project.” The \$6 million CMAQ project may represent a **watershed** in how **NYC citizens affect local traffic problems**. Key aspects of the project contribute to a high likelihood that community desires for traffic reduction will outweigh city government’s traditional preoccupation with traffic flow:

- The Request For Proposal/ Project Design was written

collectively by community representatives, elected officials, the Mayor's Office, NYC DOT and Transportation Alternatives.

- The consultant selection committee of eight included four community representatives.
- The consultant is instructed to run the project as a "collaborative" process which will build **consensus around specific goals**, recommends specific traffic calming solutions for achieving them and finally builds consensus around a set of solutions.

- Because elected officials have been intimately involved in the project from the onset, and are invested heavily in its success, it is less likely than usual that solutions **community-favored solutions** will be ignored by NYC DOT.

Overall, the project's framework makes it tough for DOT to act unilaterally without serious political repercussions. The challenge now for the affected communities is to do the hard work posed by the open process.



S.I. "Bus Lane" an HOV Hoax ?

The NY State DOT is expected to announce plans to **add a bus lane** to a portion of the Staten Island Expressway at a public meeting on the SIE Major Investment Study to be held **Wednesday night**. The lane addition proposal, part of a package of "fast track" improvements to the gridlocked corridor, comes with no guarantee that it will not be opened up in the future to cars as well. Efforts by the Tri-State Campaign to add such a guarantee were rejected by the New York Metropolitan Transportation Council, which has yet to approve the project. Meanwhile, the fourth lane is to be built using **design specifications suited for auto use** — which differ from those needed for a lane to be used only by professional bus drivers — making the project look suspiciously like an opening bid to add high occupancy vehicle lanes for the length of the expressway.

The proposal should receive closer scrutiny within the MIS forum before advancing any further. A growing number of Staten Island express bus riders are calling for **removal of cars from the existing Gowanus Expressway HOV lane**, where congestion is worsening because cars carrying as few as two occupants can gain entry. Furthermore, the new SIE bus lane will cost \$75 million and is being planned outside of the ongoing long range plan the major investment study is supposed to develop. The extent to which a bus-only lane will help travel times has yet to be determined.

Visit the Tri-State Transportation Campaign Web Site

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



<http://www.tstc.org>

Legislators Join Route 29 Fight

Members of the **NJ Assembly** representing the Trenton area have asked Governor Whitman and Assemblyman Richard Bagger, Chair of the Assembly's Appropriations Committee, to **withdraw funding for NJDOT's proposed Route 29** construction project along the Trenton waterfront. They said the move would save the state \$39 million.

In a recent letter, Assemblymembers Bonnie Coleman and Reed Gusciora also noted that it was in Trenton's interest to **preserve and enhance the Delaware River waterfront** as open space — they wrote that the Route 29 plan "ignores the economic and environmental value of Trenton's waterfront and further limits access."

Coleman and Reed said the state ought to **make better use of other highways**, like Route 129 and the I-295 Trenton beltway, while banning trucks along the waterfront. They said that changing signs to route traffic in this matter was very low cost, could provide **immediate traffic relief around Trenton** and would permit the state time to develop options other than the destructive Route 29 project.

A traffic study commissioned by the Tri-State Campaign recommended similar measures (see *MTR #175*).

TransitChek: Seeking NY Jump-Start

NY State Senator Seymour Lachman has introduced legislation to require NY State to offer state workers the option of enrolling in TransitChek, the federal transit commuter tax benefit program. During development of the federal transportation authorization (TEA-21) that became law last month, Senator Moynihan inserted a provision that eased rules that had made it difficult for many employees and employers to take advantage of the benefit, now valued at \$65 per month.

The Straphangers Campaign has calculated that a \$63 monthly NYC Transit pass would cost only \$45 for the average New Yorker enrolled in the TransitChek program.

Senator Lachman said that one study showed that companies offering TransitChek generated 8.5% fewer motor vehicle commuting trips than other companies.

Governor Pataki is said to be considering offering the program to state employees. It is not clear whether Mayor Giuliani is weighing a similar step.

Days Numbered for NJ HOV Lanes ?

In a reply opinion piece, NJ Transportation Commissioner John Haley accused the *Star-Ledger* and its "Lanes of Pain" **crusade to abolish the carpool lanes** on I-80 and I-287 (see last issue), with unproductively fanning the flames of public outrage.

Commissioner Haley said that in the age of gridlock, the decisions to build the HOV lanes were **sound public policy**, and that "I cannot give up so easily" and decommission the lanes under media and motorist pressure.

Still, Haley says the most important part of a new NJ DOT effort to market the HOV lanes is that it will

“**position the state to seek HOV removal** should our efforts fall short of our objectives.”

Haley said that the state would make a determination regarding the carpool lanes’ future in June, 1999.

The Commissioner's piece closes by noting that opening the carpool lanes to all traffic would provide only a short-term traffic benefit, since **traffic growth is likely to overwhelm the new drive-alone capacity** the lanes would provide.

Congressmen Bob Franks and Rodney Frelinghuysen will hold a public hearing on New Jersey’s HOV lanes on Monday, July 13 (see box at right).

Official Opinion

A *Newsday* report this weekend on the MTA’s pending incentive toll study contained the following **upbeat quotes** from public officials:

Cynthia Munk, NY State Thruway Authority: “[variable tolls are] demand management when you have growing numbers using your facilities and you do not have the capacity or space to build.”

Cruz Russel, Port Authority: “I think it’ll take a while to get out the door, but I think the simple truth is that [congestion pricing] is certainly a strategy whose time has come.”

Detecting Dirty Diesels

In June, Governor Pataki announced agreement with the NY legislature on a program to regularly **test heavy duty diesel vehicles**. Diesel-powered vehicles over 8,500 pounds in NYC, Long Island, and Rockland and Westchester Counties would have to be tested annually. Additionally, vehicles throughout the state would be subject to random roadside tests. Vehicles that fail tests will have to have emissions systems repaired. State agencies are to have the program and testing system in place by June, 1999.

Sick Transit

Amtrak created an embarrassing public relations storm in June when one of its Empire Corridor trains abruptly went out of service in Hudson, 30 miles short of its Albany destination. Passengers told new organizations that the conductor announced: “This train is ending at Hudson. Anyone interested in getting to Albany is **on your own.**” Numerous delays and a canceled train along the **Empire Corridor** — common occurrences along the line — that day pushed the train crew beyond its 12-hour work limit, after which it simply abandoned the train. The lone remaining conductor had to call local police to protect him from stranded passengers. Later, Amtrak pledged to refund all tickets. NY State DOT, which helps fund Empire Corridor service, should investigate the instance and Amtrak performance in NY generally and make its support contingent on pledges of improvement.

Congressional fact-finding forum

HOV LANES IN NEW JERSEY Reps. Bob Franks, Rodney Frelinghuysen

Monday, July 13 10:00am

**Somerset County Vocational & Technical School
North Bridge St. and Vogt Drive, Bridgewater**

Call 908-686-5576

Don’t Walk

Newark is the **pedestrian danger capital** of NJ, according to NJ Dept. of Law and Public Safety data.

From 1990-1996, pedestrian deaths made up **29 percent** of all traffic-related fatalities in Newark, NJ. Fatality reports say motorists were at fault in 43% of these deaths, though the structure of reporting is unable to account for **poorly designed walking environments** or overall biases of street designs that favor car flow over easy and safe pedestrian movement.

During 1991-1995, over **15% of injuries to NJ pedestrians occurred in Newark**, although the city accounted for only 3.5% of New Jersey’s population in that period. During the four years, youth under age 16 accounted for 25% of Newark’s population and suffered 32% of pedestrian injuries in the city.

This spring, State education officials and the Tri-State Transportation Campaign asked Newark Mayor Sharpe James to mount a major traffic calming effort, but the city has not substantively responded.

Calendar

July 8 6pm Staten Island Expressway major investment study advisory committee meeting. College of Staten Island, 2800 Victory Boulevard #6S room 318. 718-482-4559

July 9 12:15pm Long Island RR Commuters Council monthly meeting. 347 Madison Ave., 10th floor, Manhattan. 212-878-7087.

July 9 Noon Metro-North RR Commuter Council monthly meeting. 347 Madison Ave., 10th floor, Manhattan. 212-878-7087.

July 28 6pm Auto-Free NY walking tour: Brooklyn Historic Trolley Museum. Meet at B61 bus stop, Jay & Willoughby Sts. 212-475-3394.

July 29 9:30am MTA Board meeting, 347 Madison, 5th floor, Manhattan. 212-878-7000.

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