

Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

Number 181

July 17, 1998

NEWS

An Old Line on Pricing

In a letter to the *NY Post* this week, the **Automobile Club of New York** reiterates its long-standing claim that those who drive to work in New York do it because they have to, not because they want to. The Club sought to rebut a recent *Post* editorial that said congestion relief pricing – charging higher tolls during crowded peak periods – was worth a try (see *MTR* #178). “While some high-level executives may have the flexibility to adjust their hours to travel off-peak, most working people would simply have to shell out more money,” writes the Auto Club’s Dennis Crossley. For once, we would like to **see the Club document its claim** that higher peak period tolls would dun legions of working class motorists.

National Personal Transportation Study data the Campaign has received from NYMTC indicate that “working folks” do proportionately little of New York City’s driving. The 1994 rate of vehicle miles traveled for NYC households making more than \$40,000 per year was more than **five times greater** than for city households bringing in less than \$40,000. Households from the two income groups traveled about the same transit mileage per year.

Moreover, research done by the MTA in the 1980s found that the majority of **car commuters** receive some form of **financial incentive** (employer-provided parking, mileage reimbursements, etc.) to drive to work in New York City. Perhaps these employers could start paying the workers to drive at off-peak times, or offer them TransitChek.

1/3 of NY AAA Members Back Variable Tolls

The Club is also making much of a recent survey of its downstate members that found two-thirds of them **opposing peak-hour toll surcharges** within a variable-price toll scheme. But we wonder whether the Club’s leadership isn’t starting to lose touch with the sentiments of its membership. Since Club members are motorists by definition, and have been exposed, via Club materials, to more negative publicity about congestion relief pricing than other citizens, we find the **33% who checked “favor”** very encouraging.



Common wisdom among political consultants is that a campaign starting off with a 30% favorable rating stands in good stead.

Whitman Administration Muzzles Rte 29 Foe

NJDOT and the NJ Tidelands Resource Council have scheduled a re-hearing for a permit for DOT’s Route 29 construction project, which will pave over the last accessible part of **Trenton’s waterfront**. The project’s opponents, including the Tri-State Transportation Campaign, are contesting the re-hearing, arguing that there is no special reason why a project rejected once should get another shot at a “yes” vote. If held, the hearing will take place August 5, and will involve the project’s opponents and its backers at the NJ DOT. But at least one New Jersey employee has been ordered by state bosses to stay away.

Lee Widjeskog, a biologist for the **NJ Dept. of Environmental Protection’s** Division of Fish, Game and Wildlife, **spoke out against Route 29** construction during previous Tidelands Resource Council hearings, despite DEP’s official backing of the project. The project will fill a part of the Delaware River used by spawning fish. Widjeskog’s division had opposed the project, but ultimately DEP issued a building permit for the highway extension.

Gov. Whitman supports destruction of the waterfront.

Now, DEP bosses have ordered Widjeskog to stay away from the next Tidelands Resource Council hearing. “DEP has issued the permit, and there’s no need for anyone from DEP to say anything else about this issue,” DEP Assistant Commissioner Raymond Cantor told the *Trentonian*. Widjeskog said he will skip the hearing, but will continue to denounce the project if asked about it.

NJDOT Can’t Use \$12.6 Million

Seeks Gas Tax Hike, but Hands Dough to Toll Road

In response to NJDOT’s assertion that **no repair projects** on roads under state or local jurisdiction are **ready to move forward** other than those already fully funded, the Board of the North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority voted this week to allocate \$12.6 million for signage, paving and bridge painting on the New Jersey Turnpike in Bergen County. Morris County cast the lone dissenting vote. This is the first time that the NJTPA has **approved federal funding** for a project on any of **New Jersey’s toll roads**.

The NJTPA had indicated a strong preference for funding publicly-operated roads with the money and skepticism about the lack of needy projects, but knuckled under to DOT once again after the agency rejected

all alternative projects put forward by the counties and TPA staff as not ready to move ahead.

NJDOT seemed unembarrassed to reveal its **inability to find a use for the money** even while **pushing for a 4-cent hike in the gas tax**, which would increase revenues available to the agency. The Whitman Administration has circulated long lists of transportation projects “at risk” should the tax increase not come to pass. But **DOT’s inability to get maintenance projects underway** with the money it already has prompts questions whether adding \$200 million a year to the State’s transportation budget with no strings attached will yield any increase in road and bridge repair projects

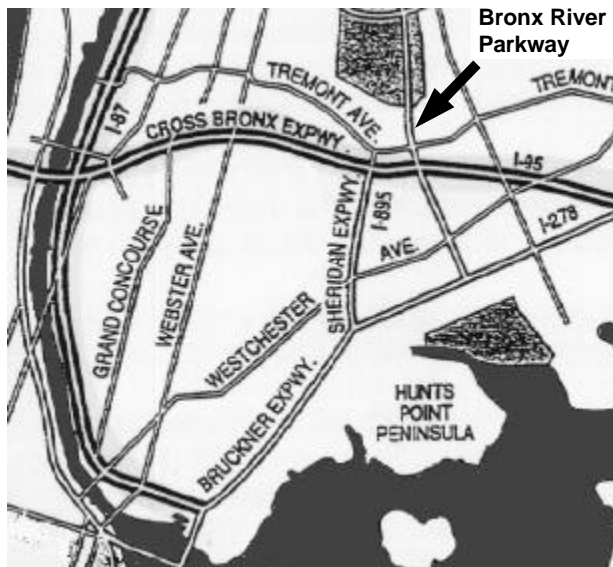
The award of funds to the Turnpike prompted other questions as well. Freeholder William Van Dyke of Bergen County raised the specter of the \$300 million Turnpike interchange proposed for the Hackensack Meadowlands following suit in seeking federal funds. Other Freeholders stated that the circumstances were unusual and should not be regarded as setting a precedent. Yet Turnpike Director Edward Gross made clear that he was not seeking the funds because the toll road needed money for the projects (when reporters asked Gross whether the Turnpike could afford the Bergen project itself, he replied, “Sure”) but rather to **establish the Turnpike’s right to an annual allotment** of funds.

New York May Boost Sheridan, Bronx Highway Traffic With New Link

The New York State DOT’s response to the proposal by Bronx groups, the NYC Environmental Justice Alliance and the Tri-State Campaign to **decommission the Sheridan Expressway** and turn it into parkland admits that the road is underutilized and says the proposal is “provocative and worthy of additional debate.”

But the DOT adds that a better idea might be to **boost Sheridan Expressway traffic volumes** by building a **new link between the Sheridan and the nearby Bronx River Parkway**. The link would likely parallel the Cross-Bronx Expressway along 177th Street.

That idea is likely to be a non-starter among residents



Whitman Woos Dems In Fight for Gas Tax

The Black Ministers Council of NJ endorsed Governor Whitman’s call for a gas tax hike, accepting the **Governor’s arguments** that the increase would mean **projects and better transportation for cities**.

Legislative leaders in Trenton have said they are unwilling to push the 4-cent gas tax hike provision they have agreed to with the Governor onto the November ballot for consideration by voters without **solid backing from Democrats**.

Governor Whitman was in Hudson County last week seeking the support of Bayonne Mayor and State Assembly Minority Leaders Joseph Doria. The Governor said the **Hudson-Bergen light rail project “could be in jeopardy”** if the gas tax increase is not approved. **The claim is bogus**, because NJ has already entered into agreements with the federal government and the rail line’s builder/operator to complete the project.

She also said upgrades to the Bergen, Main and Pascack Valley NJ Transit commuter rail lines were “at risk,” although at least part of the Bergen-Main upgrade is also part of a funding pact with the FTA.

The Tri-State Transportation Campaign has pressed the Whitman Administration to include **spending criteria in any gas tax increase** that would ensure that transportation investments in NJ really do benefit cities and avoid promoting ex-urban sprawl development. So far, the administration has refused to consider even the idea of spending controls or guidelines, and strong indications abound that, with the exception of some increase for NJ Transit, NJ’s transportation leaders are looking ahead to business as usual. In recent years, that has meant **heavy suburban and ex-urban road building** and neglect of infrastructure maintenance.

The Whitman Administration announced this week that **NJ Transit fares would not increase** this year. It is the eighth straight year without a fare hike.

on nearby blocks, and with advocates for nearby schools and daycare and senior centers. South Bronx community leaders generally feel that **highway construction has severely hurt the borough** by severing and blighting communities, and by polluting the air. A look at a map reveals that the South Bronx is closely surrounded by interstate-style highways. The area’s childhood hospitalization rate for asthma is already ten times higher than the national average.

For these reasons, a number of civic organizations conceived and embraced the idea of removing the Sheridan. A number of Bronx elected officials are also sympathetic with the idea and are weighing public endorsements of it. They are likely to take a dim view of plans to **justify the Sheridan’s existence by funneling extra traffic** onto it.

A general rule of traffic in congested areas is that it will grow to fill the space available. The proposed Bronx River Parkway-Sheridan connection may ease some vehicle trips, but it would also generate new trips.

Like the Sheridan itself, **the link would be redundant**, because already imposed over the Bronx' dense neighborhoods is an interlinked lattice-work of high-volume highways composed of the Major Deegan, Bruckner and Cross-Bronx Expressways and the Bronx River and Hutchinson Parkways. The Sheridan and Bronx River Parkways provide additional links between the Cross-Bronx and the Deegan/Bruckner, which themselves intersect at two points.

Harbor Railroad Network to Get New Links

The Port Authority is developing plans to provide a rail link between Staten Island's **Howland Hook** Marine Terminal and **Ports Newark and Elizabeth**. The link would be established by building a connector between the S.I. Railroad freight tracks, which run west from Howland Hook to Cranford Junction in NJ, and Conrail's Chemical Coast Line, a north-south track that parallels the NJ Turnpike. Currently, one line crosses over the other. Connecting the tracks will allow double-stack access at Howland Hook and provide capacity for higher amounts of rail traffic. Under the Conrail acquisition, both lines will be shared by CSX and Norfolk-Southern Railroads. The project is not yet funded, but should cost about \$10 million and will take two years.

Rail service to Howland Hook cannot begin, however, until the continuously **delayed rehabilitation** of the S.I. Railroad line is completed. Work on the Union County portion was not resumed last spring due to a dispute between the New Jersey DOT and the Port Authority over a \$4 million funding shortfall. However, officials at several agencies have confirmed that an **agreement to finance the project's completion** is in the final stages, and could be announced within a week. Meanwhile, the portion of the line in Staten Island NYC's jurisdiction is nearly complete, with tests of the Arthur Kill lift bridge to begin next week.

NJ Reps Hear HOV Perspectives

Congressmen Bob Franks and Rodney Frelinghuysen convened a hearing Monday to discuss the future of HOV lanes in New Jersey. A *Star Ledger* campaign has whipped up a **movement to open the carpool lanes to general traffic**, and many elected officials are riding what they view as a groundswell in favor of dumping the HOV restrictions on I-80 and I-287 for good.

Testimony at the hearing was unsurprising. Senator Lautenberg and several U.S. Representatives testified that it seemed the HOV lanes were not working, and that they should probably be opened to all traffic. NJ-DOT appeared to back off of press statements made by Governor Whitman's office that had made it look as if Trenton was ready to bolt from the lanes at the first opportunity — NJ Transportation Commissioner John

Haley said the state would attempt to make the lanes work, and would **determine their future in June, 1999**.

The Tri-State Campaign's



The remove-the-Sheridan movement grew out of a NY State DOT proposal to **rebuild the Bruckner/Sheridan interchange** at a cost of \$245 million. That project's goals, as articulated by DOT, would be met by removing the Sheridan, and thus the interchange, and constructing a special truck route from the Bruckner to the Hunts Point Market along Edgewater Road.

Policing NYC's Bus Lanes

NYPD brass say they'll stop police officers from **parking** personal vehicles in the **Second Avenue bus lane** on Manhattan's East Side. Responding to a letter from the Straphangers Campaign that recounted observation of over a dozen cars with NYPD parking permits in the bus lane near the NY Police Academy, NYPD Chief of Personnel Michael Markman said commanders of nearby NYPD units would be told to keep the lane clear. Apparently, Straphangers' reputation for effectiveness preceded them. Markman concluded the letter "We appreciate the work you do **on behalf of the transit riders** of New York City."

Bus lane enforcement — along with more service and management of **bus bunching** — is a key element of Straphangers' ten-point plan for better NYC bus service. Straphangers' letter to the NYPD noted that Second Avenue's M-15 line has the most irregular service in the city, with over half its buses arriving bunched together or with big gaps in service.

Since release of the Straphangers Campaign's "State of the Buses" report in January, transit advocates have made several appeals for stepped-up bus lane enforcement. The official response has been that the Transit Authority and city agencies are working together to improve things on a case-by-case basis — but so far, there is no outward evidence of clearer lanes of better bus flow.

Won't Stem the Tide

NYC Transit was set to announce Monday it would **add some subway and bus service** in response to growing NYC transit ridership. Transit will add 10 train trips to weekday service, on the A, N and #1 lines, and 16 new round trips on weekend #7 trains. Bus service will be added on 69 routes in all five boroughs.

Transit advocates who have been **critical of NYC Transit preparations** for a ridership jump from the new weekly and monthly transit passes said the schedule changes were minor and insufficient. "This is a **molecule in a drop in a bucket**," said the Straphangers Campaign's Joe Rappaport.



Janine Bauer said the question facing New Jersey is less that of whether to keep the HOV lanes, but rather "the question is **when our state DOT is going to start focusing on reducing traffic** and congestion...To date, DOT has done very well at building highways that attract ever-increasing amounts of traffic, and very poorly at managing that traffic or reducing the number

of vehicle miles of travel or trips.” She said that in the I-80 and I-287 corridors, municipalities needed to recreate a traffic management version of the **“ten towns” initiative** Somerset and Morris County municipalities organized to reduce water pollution in the Great Swamp. Joint policies and initiatives, undertaken with agencies or TMAs, could include new local transit, **land use and zoning changes** to make transit more cost-effective; shared parking facilities; maximum instead of minimum parking requirements for new development; and parking “cash-out” policies.

Michael Replogle, director of the Environmental Defense Fund’s transportation project, described the **“High-Occupancy/Toll” lanes** created in recent years in San Diego and in Orange County, CA. He said permitting any vehicle to use the HOV lane for a toll would get at the problem of under-use, while also guaranteeing that the **travel capacity** represented by the HOT lane would **not be overcome by traffic growth**. Both NJDOT and critics of highway expansion have warned that if the HOV lanes are turned into new highway lanes, I-287 and I-80 will experience 6-lane gridlock within a few years.

A Federal Highway Administration official reiterated a theme sounded in previous weeks by NJDOT: in contrast to the dismal performance of the I-287 HOV lane, **the I-80 HOV lane is working** because ... “At the national average vehicle occupancy rate, if the I-80 HOV lane was decommissioned, the same number of people would travel in 1,000 more vehicles. For I-80, all lanes would experience same congestion of the general use lanes today,” said FHWA’s Dennis Merida.

I-287 HOV a Fraud from the Start

Even if that is the case, it’s difficult to dispute that the I-287 HOV lane appears as if it were **designed to fail**. NJDOT, with complicity by FHWA and the EPA, built the \$143 million HOV lane without any **environmental impact study** that might have shown what a miserable disaster it would prove to be. When organizations that launched the Tri-State Transportation Campaign, like NJPIRG and EDF tried, through the courts, to require DOT to do those studies, some of the same elected leaders, agencies and newspapers now calling the HOV lane project a complete folly attacked the environmental organizations – as obstructionists trying to delay a useful and badly needed project.

In fact, the I-287 HOV lane was ranked by the agency and elected officials that make up the North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority at **9th out of 9** for highway expansion projects and #104 out of 115 for all

FY 95 projects. But NJDOT moved it to #1, and began construction.

Many projects, including important maintenance and reconstruction jobs, scheduled for FY 95 were delayed because of the I-287 HOV.

Environmental laws are sometimes viewed as overly technical or leading to delay. Rather, they are common-sense requirements that say **“what are the impacts of a project before you go spending all that money?”** “What are we getting?”

Bayonne Port Development Looking Up

The election of a new mayor in Bayonne may bode well for establishment of a container **port with direct rail freight links** at the soon-to-be-closed Military Ocean Terminal (MOTBY) peninsula. Joseph Doria, who was elected in May and also serves as Minority Leader in the New Jersey State Assembly, said in a statement that the “property has tremendous potential to become an internationally recognized center of shipping,” and called for collaboration with the Port Authority on developing a portion of MOTBY as an intermodal freight facility. The peninsula is strategically located on NY Harbor and features channels which can be dredged to 50 feet without hitting bedrock, making it a logical location for deep water port development. Efforts to **blast out deeper channels** to Ports Newark and Elizabeth would be considerably more costly.

A commission set up last year to determine a preliminary plan for the redevelopment of MOTBY almost left maritime options out entirely, but eventually set aside 125 acres for port development. Questions have since been raised as to whether that amount would be sufficient for a worthwhile container operation. A staff member from Mayor Doria’s office called the 125 acres “negotiable” and said that the city was willing to entertain increasing it as long as public access for Bayonne’s citizens was ensured. In August, Mayor Doria and the Bayonne City Council will appoint members to a local redevelopment authority, which will develop a final plan for the December 1999 base closure.

Calendar

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.

Visit the Tri-State Transportation Campaign Web Site

<http://www.tstc.org>

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



Mobilizing the Region

MTR#181 Contributing: Therese Langer, Lisa Schreiber, Bill Yates Editor: Jon Orcutt Executive Director, Janine Bauer

240 West 35th Street #801 , New York, NY 10001 tel. (212) 268-7474 fax (212) 268-7333 email tstc@tstc.org