

Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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NEWS

NYC's Capital Deficit

A report issued last month by NYC Comptroller Alan Hevesi spotlighted **infrastructure funding gaps** that could plague New York City for years to come. The report looked at roads and bridges, subways, police and fire buildings, schools and the water system. It concludes that over 10 years, the city will have to spend \$92 billion for a state of good infrastructure repair. But the city presently projects to spend or receive only \$52 billion.

The report analysed **NYC DOT and NYC Transit capital needs** (NYC's "Ten Year Capital Strategy" says the city will contribute \$1.26 billion to NYC Transit, which is run as a state public authority, over 10 years).

In the study, NYC DOT and NYC Transit account for 36% of the \$92 billion in needs, and 35% of the \$52 billion in currently anticipated spending. The report puts **Transit's shortfall at \$11.3 billion, and DOT's at \$4 billion**. Transit's deficit runs the gamut of subway system reconstruction and modernization. NYC DOT's is concentrated mainly in city street reconstruction. The figures **do not include the costs of new projects** like a freight rail tunnel or expansion of the transit system.

The report issues well-known warnings about the consequences of "deferred" maintenance. Its proposed solutions do not make up the \$40 billion gap, but would permit about a 15% capital spending hike. They include greater federal aid, more pay-as-you-go capital spending, use of surpluses to retire debt, devotion of "one-shot" revenues to the capital budget, contributions from developers, and reforming city contracting law.

This aspect of the report leaves something to be desired. First, the key issue for MTA capital spending will not be city funding, but whether or not **NY State** will come up with new revenue when the current **MTA capital plan** expires at the end of 1999. Second, Hevesi presents no discussion at all of recovering more infrastructure costs **from motorists and truckers** themselves.

More sensible application of user fees to the cars and trucks that clog and pollute the city and pound its roads would be a big step toward easing NYC's chronic traffic congestion, as well as provide capital resources. Studies have found East River bridge tolls would bring the city nearly **\$1 billion annually**, which would more than erase the capital deficit Hevesi finds for NYC DOT. Without new resources for transportation infrastructure and maintenance, NYC will be forever behind, with all the economic and quality of life consequences identified by the Comptroller's research.

Ridership Booming, Service is Not

NYC Transit president Lawrence Reuter expressed frustration that rider advocates demand more after this week's announcement that **subway and bus service would be hiked 3% and 5%**, respectively, by mid-2000. "You can't just say if ridership goes up 1% you have to put 1% more service out there," he told the *Daily News*.

But the numbers don't even approach such a one-for-one scenario. Moreover, the **buses and trains are overcrowded now**, future rider increases aside.

Bus ridership is up sharply in the last year and a half, and is projected by the TA to continue growing into mid-2000. Overall, that will mean a 36% bus rider increase from 1997 to the end of 1999, but recent and planned service increases will add only 10% more bus service.

Subway riders increased 6% since the start of 1997, and are expected to increase even faster to 2000. Gain in 1997-1999 subway ridership could reach 17%. But under current plans, NYC Transit service increases will total 4%.

MTA Info Policy Takes the Low Road

Getting information from MTA NYC Transit concerning ridership and transit service is getting harder. Consider:

- For the first time in memory, the MTA monthly briefing book released this week contained no NYC Transit ridership statistics. Transit officials attributed the omission to "back office" and "accounting" issues with counting riders.
- Criticized this week over levels of service compared to booming bus and subway ridership, transit officials asserted they had capacity to spare because most of the increase is during off-peak times. They provided no data whatsoever to back up the claim, despite repeated requests by reporters and advocates.
- NYC Transit claims it cannot provide data on the rate of MetroCard failures – mis-swipes, lockouts, etc.

NYC Transit's information stonewall has arisen at a time when the agency is collecting more and better data about its system and riders than ever before, thanks to computerized turnstiles and bus fareboxes. But in recent years, government in New York has decided it has the right to restrict information about its own performance.

NJ HOV Foes Target Lautenberg

The Newark *Star-Ledger* and NJ House Republicans are attempting to put Senator Frank Lautenberg in the hot seat over decommissioning of the carpool (HOV) lanes on I-287 and I-80.

At issue is Congress' transportation appropriations bill for fiscal year 1999. As the *Star-Ledger's* "dump the HOVs" campaign unfolded this summer, Lautenberg amended the Senate's version of the bill to permit NJDOT to petition the FHWA for a **federal payback waiver** in the event that the I-287 HOV lane is converted into a regular highway lane. The federal government says New Jersey has to pay back federal funds used to

build the HOV lane **if the carpool regulations are eliminated**, but a payback waiver would eliminate this problem. States may ordinarily petition FHWA in similar cases, but the I-287 lanes were funded by a federal line-item, which adds Congress to the equation. Lautenberg's amendment takes Congress back out of it.

An amendment pushed by Marge Roukema and Rodney Frelinghuysen in the **House appropriations bill** goes much further — it essentially **allows NJDOT to abandon the HOV lanes** on I-287 and I-80 **unilaterally** without any discussion with the feds and no threat of paying back the federal funds allocated to the project.

Now Lautenberg is being pressured to back the House language. A front page *Star-Ledger* column last Wednesday painted Lautenberg as a possible drag on anti-HOV momentum. In the paper, Roukema and Frelinghuysen challenged Lautenberg to act, implying the HOV issue could come up in Lautenberg's reelection race in 2000.

Even if it is able to negotiate various Clean Air Act and environmental review problems that NJ's HOV foes haven't taken much time to consider, the effort to stamper the HOV lanes out of existence will backfire. It addresses none of the **underlying problems fueling gridlock** in the Garden State. If successful, HOV foes will give NJ motorists four instead of three lanes of gridlock on the highways within a few years.

A better approach in the appropriations bill would be funding for provision of express bus routes, train station jitneys in Somerset and Morris Counties, feasibility studies for converting the HOV lanes into "high-occupancy/toll lanes" and implementing parking "cash-out" strategies along the I-287 and I-80 corridors.

Elizabeth Acts to Protect Peds

The City of Elizabeth is launching a pedestrian safety campaign. Last week, Elizabeth Mayor Christian Bollwage said he would form a Pedestrian Safety Task Force that would seek to work with NJDOT and state police. State records show that **34% of auto-related deaths** in Elizabeth from 1990-1994 were pedestrians, and that half of those fatalities were children under age 15.

Elizabeth is receiving \$50,000 from the NJ Division of Highway Traffic Safety and \$40,000 of city urban enterprise zone funds to review dangerous sites and upgrade signs and crosswalks and run law enforcement and public education campaigns.

It was unclear from initial reports whether Elizabeth would test and employ self-enforcing traffic calming street design techniques like sidewalk extensions and speed humps. Traffic calming is generally more effective and pro-pedestrian than better signs and re-painted crosswalks. The NYC DOT has deployed traffic calming installations around NYC neighborhoods, and many traffic calming techniques are described in **NJDOT's Pedestrian Planning Guidelines**. *Star Ledger*

Preserving Highway Capacity: HOT Lanes

"High Occupancy/Toll" lanes, where toll-paying drive-alone motorists share special lanes with carpoolers, are working in California and Texas. In several cases, the HOT lanes were established where HOV lanes were under-utilized. Instead of throwing away mobility afforded by the special lanes by opening them to all traffic — as the *Star Ledger* and numerous elected officials in NJ are eager to do on I-287 and I-80 — HOT lane managers are **preserving road capacity** and allocating it rationally via market mechanisms. Road pricing, not ham-handed HOV rules, is likely the best way to preserve road capacity in a society of 2-4 car households.

The Federal Highway Administration's "value pricing" program singles out HOT lane projects as worthy of federal study and start-up funds. According to *Innovation Briefs*, the Hampton Roads Planning District Commission (VA) has been allocated one of the project slots available for funding under FHWA's "value pricing" program. HRPDC wants to **convert an underused HOV lane** on I-64 to a "high occupancy/toll" lane, where single-occupant cars can pay a toll to use the HOV lane. Peak hour person-trips carried by the HOV lane are well below those found in the adjacent general use lanes.

At a workshop in Washington last week, the FHWA clarified aspects of its \$11 million/year value pricing program. The feds said implementation projects that apply variable pricing to congested roadways or to parking will receive priority consideration.

Several speakers noted that application of **roadway pricing policies would inevitably increase**, because provision of highway capacity has no chance at keeping up with demand for driving. One economist told the gathering, "We would not be surprised at all if Safeway decided to give away tomatoes, and every time we went [to the supermarket] there were no tomatoes," he said.



California non-stop toll reader gantry

Taxi Reform on the Table

Two large NYC cab fleet owners have proposed to the City of NY that 125 taxis be returned to the **old driver commission system** under a pilot program the city and industry would study. Most taxi drivers used to work as employees in a cab garage, keeping from 45 to 51 percent of fares and tips, and receiving some company benefits. The system permitted many to **make cab driving a career**. After 1979, taxi medallion owners were permitted to lease their license to drivers. The change guaranteed income to the owners and sharply reduced their costs.

Many taxi industry observers say the current system, under which drivers can pay up to \$110 per shift to lease a car, forces very long shifts and intense pressure to collect fares. They say this **leads to unsafe driving and high driver turnover**, which further compounds safety problems. New Yorkers — pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists and cab riders alike — have felt for years that cabbies drive like maniacs. The *NY Times* documented earlier this year that cab-caused crashes were on the rise. Some city transportation experts say speeding and reckless cabs set the tone on city streets, and have contributed heavily to a general breakdown of lawful and sane behavior at the wheel during the 1980s and 90s.

The *NY Post* wrote recently that “the leasing system makes driving a taxi the urban version of **sharecropping**...the driver bears all the risks of the industry — whether they come in the form of a bad day, bad weather or a massive traffic jam.”

The industry proposal appears to have been made to head off possible action by the NYC Taxi and Limousine Commission to change the leasing system. The system was implemented after fleet owners complained in the

1970s that drivers were doing business “off the meter” and pocketing the proceeds. The owners propose to operate the 125 car garage under the commission system for two years and compare its economic, driver retention and safety performance to the rest of the taxi industry. Voices like the *Post*, however, assert that “**there is nothing to test**...the city’s experience of the commission system shows that it makes an enormous and positive difference to taxi service.”

Visit the Tri-State Transportation Campaign Web Site

<http://www.tstc.org>

A Good Read: *Commuter News*

A free weekly newspaper is keeping transit commuters up to date on New York and New Jersey transportation issues. *Commuter News*, which reaches about 18,000 people and appears to have impressive advertising sales, reports on the **latest railroad, bus, and subway developments** from a populist, transit-riding perspective.

The tabloid-format paper regularly features articles from *Mobilizing the Region*.

Earlier this year, *Commuter News* tracked the failed effort to increase the gas tax in New Jersey. The paper withheld support of the gas tax hike, which would have provided funding for transportation projects, citing the lack of any guarantee that the money would be spent on road maintenance and transit initiatives rather than highway expansion projects.

The paper also chronicled this year’s debate in Washington over the federal transportation spending bill, and reprinted the **Straphangers Campaign’s ten point plan** for better NYC bus service. As climbing ridership in the region has increased higher revenues for our transit agencies, the paper has called for using the funds to increase service.

This week’s edition includes news on the upcoming renovation of NJTransit’s Hoboken Terminal, an update on the multi-agency “Access to the Region’s Core” commuter rail study, an editorial calling on the Port Authority to broker an agreement on the halted **Staten Island Railroad freight project** in Union County, New Jersey (see *MTR* #187) and a statement by NJ Transportation Commissioner Haley on the stampede to eliminate HOV lanes on I-80 and I-287. *Commuter News* is distributed at or near commuter rail and subway stations, and at major work destinations like the World Trade Center.

Commuter News, 732-636-4316, cn-njny@cybernex.net

City’s Trash Transport Debate Continues

Environmental advocates and concerned citizens testified at a Wednesday NYC City Council hearing on solid waste issues that NYC **waste export strategies** should minimize truck impacts and rely as much as possible on rail and barge transport.

A spokesperson for the Citywide Recycling Advisory Board (CRAB) said that this would mean maximizing use of existing Dept. of Sanitation Marine Transfer stations for **commercial as well as residential waste**, and reducing reliance on truck-dependent land-based transfer stations. In Manhattan, 80% of the trash is commercial, and it must now be taken by truck to transfer sites in other boroughs.

CRAB also argued that DOS regulations should impose strict transfer station standards whose effect will be to minimize reliance on trucks. The group said all trucks should be required to queue on the station’s premises, not in the street, and that all stations be maintained under negative air pressure to contain fumes and odors. Further, these rules should **apply to all transfer stations**, planned and existing, within a fixed time frame. Those transfer sites unable to meet the rules would close down.



South Jersey Toll Hike

The South Jersey Transportation Authority approved doubling tolls on the **Atlantic City Expressway** this week. The base toll for traveling the entire expressway will rise to \$2.50, though after EZ-Pass facilities are installed, EZ-Pass holders will receive a discount of about 85 cents.

Authority officials say that the increase is needed to raise money for a \$13 million resurfacing of the road, four new interchanges costing \$17 million total, and a project to **add lanes** between Atlantic City and Pleasantville. Tourism industry leaders, bus operators and citizens denounced the hike.

Big Rail Plans Find Track Shortage

NJ Transit officials examining **renewal of passenger service** on Bergen County's West Shore, Northern Branch and NY Susquehanna and Western rail lines will have to take account of plans for **rail freight expansion** by Norfolk Southern and CSX, the railroads that have just taken ownership of all of Conrail's assets.

CSX plans to run double track freight service on the West Shore line, which may mean that a dedicated third track would be required for passenger service.

CSX has told NJ Transit it would also prefer that any light rail vehicles operating along the Northern Branch do so on a new exclusive track — the freight railroad says many customers need to receive shipments during the day, and that this precludes the standard day/night sharing agreement between passenger and freight trains. Norfolk Southern has also indicated interest in preserving room for new sidings along the NYS&W line.

NJ Transit is examining the feasibility and costs of **constructing new passenger track capacity** and sidings in the various rights of way.

Tri-State Transportation Campaign Transportation Organizer

To work in Staten Island and Union County, NJ to promote alternatives to highway capacity expansion, including public transit and rail freight.

Organizing or public policy experience, excellent speaking and writing skills required. Mail, fax or e-mail resume to:

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Mobilizing the Region is published weekly by the Tri-State Transportation Campaign. Each edition is available via fax, e-mail or via the world wide web.

We encourage readers to submit story ideas, news tips and calendar items. We invite organizations and officials who agree with our transportation reform agenda to join the Campaign as affiliate members.

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Calendar

Sept 22 6pm Auto-Free NY. "Reducing Car Use in the Hannover Metropolitan Area," Martin Roehrleef, transportation director, Greater Hannover Assn. At Transportation Alternatives, 115 W. 30th St. #1207, Manhattan. 212-475-3394.

Sept 23 10:30am NYMTC "Freight Transportation Working Group" 1 World Trade Center #82E Manhattan 212-938-3300.

Sept 24 Noon NYC Transit Riders Council monthly meeting. 420 Lexington Ave., 11th floor, Manhattan. 212-878-7087.

Sept 24 6pm NY State Assembly Corporations Committee public hearing on Long Island Railroad operations. Little Theater, Melville Road, Farmingdale. Call 518-455-4881 to sign up to testify.

Sept. 28 7pm Presentation on Grand Concourse redesign. Bronx Borough President's Office, 198 E. 161st St., Bronx. 718-590-6105.

Oct 1, 11:45pm Transportation Research Forum luncheon — Ed Ellis: "Amtrak and Freight Railroads: Exploring Partnerships." 100 Washington St., Manhattan. \$ 212-435-4086. pgessner@panynj.gov

Oct. 2-4 Environment '98 conference, Albany. Environmental Advocates, 800-SAVE-NYS.

Oct. 4 10:00am Tour de Bronx bicycle tour of Bronx neighborhoods and cycle paths. Bronx Borough President's Office, Transportation Alternatives and others. Free. Call 718-590-2766 for a brochure.

Oct. 23 9:30 "Gov't Reform in Transportation: International and Domestic Trends." Dr. Michael Walton, Univ. of Texas. University Transportation Research Center visiting scholars seminars. 1 World Trade Cntr, 43rd floor. 212-650-8050.

Oct. 27 6pm "Restoring the Rockaway Beach Cut-off in Central Queens," Committee for Better Transit. At Transportation Alternatives, 115 W. 30th St. #1207, Manhattan. 212-475-3394.

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