

Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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NEWS

New Resources for Region?

News reports say the Port Authority's intention to **lease the World Trade Center** to a private operator could bring the bi-state agency an extra \$200 million a year. Honing the PA's mission to a more exclusive focus on transportation is a worthy goal.

Governor Pataki said a lease deal would bring a stable source of revenue to the PA "to support important transportation projects." At a meeting Thursday, reporters asked Port Authority board members **what projects they had in mind**, but the board kept its counsel.

Positive efforts the Port Authority could undertake include contributing to the next **MTA capital plan** (as it did in 1981-85), which will need to find new sources of revenue after 1999, funding **rail freight improvements**, including cross-harbor rail float barges and a new rail tunnel, **rail access to LaGuardia Airport** and cross-Hudson transit capacity improvements.

A poor choice for the PA would be revival of its proposal to build a new highway span alongside the Staten Island-New Jersey Goethals Bridge. Citizens and officials in S.I. and Elizabeth have made it clear they will fight the project, and the need for more rail freight — not expanded truck routes — is far more pressing.

Financial, Political Stars Align for More Service
NYC Transit's budget surplus stood at \$61.8 million at the end of July, slightly above last year's in-the-black mark at the same time. Transit finished 1997 with revenues \$188 million over expectations.

The good budget news is fueling demand for more bus and subway service from **jam-packed riders** and transit advocates. Ridership figures released by transit officials this week showed that the bus and subway system had 564,000 more riders each weekday this July than in July, 1997. The increase puts the system on pace to **add 1 million per day** between July, 1997 and July, 1999.

Transit service and crowding issues could figure in this fall's New York elections. Democratic nominee for governor Peter Vallone called this week for NYC Transit to add trains and cleaning crews. Governor Pataki's staff answered by pointing to the Governor's central role in the fare policies that have spurred the ridership increase, and reiterated that the administration would try to keep "investing in the system."

The *Daily News* issued several editorials calling for transit more service in the past week, a sign that the issue could heat up considerably in coming weeks and months. The paper has championed transit rider needs in the past.

EPA Opposes Route 92

- Suggests Modest Program to Aid Local Traffic -

In Edison, New Jersey today, US Environmental Protection Agency Regional Administrator **Jeanne Fox** announced her agency's continued objection to the NJ Turnpike Authority's proposal to build a new toll highway — Route 92 — across southern Middlesex County. Fox cited heavy wetlands impacts and the availability of cheaper, less destructive solutions to traffic problems.

"New Jersey has lost over half of its wetlands, and we have to balance the need for development and traffic improvements with preserving the remaining wetlands. It is my intention to begin an **intensive effort over the next thirty days** with the State of New Jersey to come up with an alternative on which we can all agree that will address these concerns," said Fox in a news release.

Through a section of the Clean Water Act, the EPA has ceded final authority on freshwater wetlands permits to the NJ Department of Environmental Protection. But since Route 92 involves a "major discharge" of land fill, the EPA has authority to comment on the permit application and its opinion will surely bear on NJ DEP's perspective. In the next thirty days, the EPA, DEP, and Turnpike Authority will be in close consultation on whether or how to follow to EPA's conclusions. NJ Governor Christine Whitman has vigorously backed the project to date.

EPA called its proposal a "modified no-build alternative" that would spare wetlands, shave over \$200 million, and still **address local traffic problems**. The EPA alternative prescribes an interchange between Route 32 and Route 130, intersection improvements and better synchronized traffic signals. Some of these measures have no Turnpike Authority connection, so it is unclear who would manage or finance them.

Tri-State Transportation Campaign hails the EPA decision as a economical compromise that will mitigate congestion **without inducing significant new traffic**. Original studies showed that Route 92 would attract almost 12,000 new vehicles per day to the area. The Campaign has consistently opposed Route 92 as for its certain potential to promote sprawl and traffic growth.

Route 92 Would Put Turnpike in the Red

At two press conferences earlier this week, before EPA's announcement, the Tri-State Transportation Campaign, NJPIRG Citizen Lobby and taxpayer groups challenged the NJ Turnpike Authority's financial judgment in pushing construction of Route 92.

A Campaign analysis compared projected Route 92 toll revenue with anticipated debt service of new construction bonds. According to the toll projections and optimistic financing scenarios, Route 92 would engender a **\$258 million shortfall** (in net present value terms) over the life of a 21-year bond.

To allow for more positive possible outcomes, the analysis included sensitivity analyses that gauged the economics of the project given 50% higher traffic than anticipated, 100% higher tolls than anticipated, or both. In each case, the **tolls failed to cover debt service** on Route 92's construction.

The findings are significant because they show that Route 92 construction could have impacts on toll revenue and rates on the Turnpike system as a whole. Though public agencies often cross-subsidize projects, the Turnpike Authority is running an overall operating deficit. Construction and reserve funds are now being used to plug a gap in debt service, which constitutes 59% of the Turnpike Authority's expenses.

A toll hike across the system would be the only way to balance the budget. Moody's, the bond rating concern, has recently **encouraged the agency to raise tolls** to improve its financial position. In 1997, Moody's warned that new Turnpike debt without higher tolls would "negatively affect" the Turnpike Authority's bond rating.

Route 92 Economics, 2000-2020	
Toll revenue:	\$168,622,000
Total Debt Service:	\$598,766,099
Toll Shortfall:	-\$430,144,099
Toll Shortfall (NPV):	-\$258,362,147

The net present value (NPV) shortfall accounts for depreciation of monetary value over time, and shows the equivalent cost today

Bronx: Highway Relief Wanted

This week, staff members for NY Assembly Members Rubin Diaz and Carmen Arroyo and City Council Member Pedro Espada said the NY State **DOT should seriously consider** the proposal by Bronx groups, the NYC Environmental Justice Alliance and the Tri-State Campaign to **tear down the Sheridan Expressway** and replace it with a park. The *Bronx Times* also reported that Congressman Serrano's office wants to "sit down with community groups and the DOT," to discuss the proposal (see the Campaign's web site for more on the Sheridan park proposal).

At a meeting this week, representatives for Bronx elected officials also expressed deep concern for **keeping trucks off of local streets in Hunts Point**. They also supported reining in traffic, pollution, congestion and accidents by ending highway capacity expansion and improving freight rail and commuter rail lines. These latter concerns will be at issue as NYS DOT proceeds with its long-range study of the Bronx' Major Deegan and Cross-Bronx Expressways.

Boosting Big Apple's Transportation I.Q. ?

On Wednesday, NYC DOT convened a gathering for vendors of "intelligent transportation system" (ITS) equipment at the Museum of Natural History. The meeting seemed an odd combination of **industry fair** and **policy pulpit** for new city transportation commissioner Wilbur Chapman.

The *Daily News* billed the event as the setting for a new declaration of war against traffic congestion by Chapman, but few specifics amounted to real news.

ITS application generally connect electronic detection and computer data processing to transportation facilities and management functions. The industry was originally called "Intelligent Vehicle-Highway Systems" because its focus was on increasing highways' traffic capacity. But potential applications in other areas abound.

New York City already uses **red light cameras** to boost traffic law enforcement, and has been been computerizing traffic signal control for years. The EZ-Pass system in use at Thruway Authority, MTA and Port Authority toll facilities is also an ITS example. The Transit Authority will shortly test a satellite-based bus locator system, which could tell waiting riders when their bus will arrive. Probably the largest ITS project pending in this region is replacement of the **subway system's antiquated signal system**. The MTA is likely to let a contract to test an advanced signal system on the Canarsie "L" subway line next year — though installation could take several years. Re-signaling the entire system may take decades.

NYC DOT's wish list on Wednesday included roadbed sensors that would adjust traffic signal timing to car volumes, photo-radar cameras that could automatically issue **summonses to speeders**, traffic signal pre-emption transponders for emergency vehicles, real-time traffic reporting on the internet and detectors that would summon police when cars block bus stops.

ITS applications can contribute to almost any transportation policy goal. For instance, the city could back up its talk about traffic safety with widespread deployment of photo-radar. Additionally, a tenfold increase in red light cameras could provide a fail-safe sanction against dangerous light-running (to date, the city has moved very slowly to expand the program).

Thus, the question of whether ITS will help NYC out of its traffic mess is really a question of what **city policy goals** are. Unfortunately, many discussions about ITS by promoters in industry and public agencies still retain a strong "boys with toys" flavor because technology is offered as a panacea in contexts where policy fundamentals are weak.

Because city government has no stomach for tackling the root problem of chronic gridlock — too many cars and trucks — all ITS can do for our traffic congestion problem is to create capacity for a few more cars to shoehorn in before streets come to a complete standstill.

ITS could come into its own in New York if, in addition to the transit and law enforcement applications

mentioned above, it were applied to real traffic management policies like variable pricing on bridge and tunnel entrances to the city. One big tradeoff for motorists is

that, today's EZ-Pass system notwithstanding, the technology exists today to implement **non-stop toll collection** systems at all of the region's toll facilities.

The Region and Rail Freight: Can't Do

Last Friday, a "double-stacked" freight train that had been switched onto the wrong side of the Hudson slammed into the 153rd Street bridge over the Hudson line in the Bronx. The early morning derailment disrupted other freight traffic and snarled the Metro-North morning commute.

A Conrail operating error was the obvious immediate culprit, but the crash highlighted the systemic and institutional problems **blocking expanded use of freight trains** to ease truck traffic and reduce business and consumer costs in New York City and Long Island.

A track segment designed specifically to keep freight trains off of commuter lines and allow them to move more easily down the Hudson and into the Bronx' Harlem River and Oak Point yards, or over the Hell Gate Bridge into Queens, Brooklyn or Long Island was all but finished in April, 1997. Known as the **Oak Point Link**, the project's sorry history has been emblematic of official inattention to and bungling of alternatives to moving goods in trucks. The 1.9-mile track project has taken almost 20 years to move from drawing board to real infrastructure.

Now the finished track has lain idle for 17 months

while the agreement on constructing the final switches and track links has bogged down between the NY State DOT and the operators of the Harlem River Rail yard. The acquisition of Conrail has also required that new operating agreement be worked out with the new railroads that will be operating into the city.

If the Oak Point Link had been open last week, the Conrail wreck probably would not have occurred. The Link has higher bridge clearances than the Metro-North route. At any rate, commuter service would have been spared a major disruption.

The Democratic nominee for governor, Peter Vallone, blamed the Pataki Administration for the project's delay and the crash. Some news coverage, however, botched the story as a dispute over "track quality" and missed the point about the Oak Point Link.

Politics aside, it seems as though the rail freight units in the region's transportation agencies, with the possible exception of the Giuliani Administration's NYC Economic Development Corp., are **not under firm marching orders** to get things done. This summer's collapse of the agreement to bring the **Staten Island Railroad** line back into service in S.I. and Union County is further evidence of rail freight's third class treatment by transportation managers. The Port Authority and NJ DOT have only 30 days left to put together a deal that will keep Union County from opposing the project outright.

Regarding the Oak Point Link, NYSDOT Commissioner Joe Boardman should personally conduct the remaining negotiations and supervise his agency's progress until trains are actually running on the not-so-new track. NJ Transportation Commissioner John Haley (a Port Authority Commissioner) could also play a big role in saving the Staten Island Railroad and beginning to move the region toward a more balanced and efficient freight system.

Queens Also Seeks Highway Relief

At a hearing last week on reconstruction of the **Brooklyn-Queens Expressway**, community groups in Jackson Heights, Queens demanded assurances that the NY State DOT will reduce the highway's impact on their community. The Friends of Travers Park and the Jackson Heights Beautification Group recommended that the state **deck over the sunken sections** of the highway and reclaim the land above it with ball courts, seating areas and other park facilities. The groups have also developed a proposal for a bikeway along the length of the BQE right-of-way.

The state DOT intends to rebuild and widen several sections of the BQE beginning in the summer, 1999. Despite concerns raised by parties along the highway like Assembly members Nolan and Lentol (see *MTR*

Rail Key to Port's Future

At a New Jersey port development strategy meeting hosted by the Tri-State Campaign this morning, representatives of the region's freight railroads stressed that **adding rail capacity** is critical to the health of the Port of NY/NJ and removal of trucks from our roads. Norfolk Southern's Alex Jordan emphasized that "the port cannot be operated efficiently with existing track infrastructure." According to Jordan, efficient container train operation depends on adding tracks to single line routes, modernizing signals, and improving dockside rail.

Railroad representatives also said growth in rail freight can have positive multiplier effects. Mike Brimmer of CSX said that as the railroads increase north-south trips, adding cars to existing trains can make some **shorter rail hauls** in the region economical for rail.

Unfortunately, funding for rail freight projects in NJ has fallen from last year's \$10 million – which was not even entirely spent – back down to \$2 million.

The meeting, which was hosted by the North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority, was called to help ensure that business, environmental groups, and local officials have an opportunity to weigh in on the **Port Authority's port plan** before it is completed in December. NJ and Port Authority officials were generally receptive to comments and pledged to seek out support from local government and other stakeholders once their port "options analysis" is completed. Including public views now, however, makes more sense.

#47) that increasing capacity at key areas along the BQE, including the Kosciuszko Bridge, will increase pollution and congestion, officials declared in 1996 that the project will have “no significant impact”.

We wonder whether NYS DOT is on its way to repeating its Gowanus debacle along the BQE. In the early 1990s, DOT attempted to avoid environmental review of the Gowanus project altogether, but deepening community and official resistance to DOT’s approach led to continually **escalating levels of review** and alternatives analysis, which the agency is still in the midst of. Community groups along the BQE cite concerns very similar to those articulated by the civic organizations that formed the Gowanus Expressway Community Coalition — air and noise pollution, the highway’s division of communities and NYS DOT’s failure to provide alternative methods of transportation to decongest the highway.

Public Backs California Road Pricing

The California DOT released its final report this week evaluating the impact of the Orange County SR-91’s **high occupancy/toll lanes**. On the highway, solo drivers who pay can share two set-aside lanes with carpools. The evaluation confirms that many commuters are willing to pay a premium to bypass chronic congestion, suggesting that roadway pricing could win support and help preserve highway capacity elsewhere.

On an average weekday, an estimated 13% of total SR-91 motorists choose to pay between \$.60 and \$3.20 to beat the jams in the road’s general use lanes. Significantly, **only 20%** of SR-91 peak period travelers **use the toll lanes on a daily basis**, and 50% report using them once a week or less. The findings suggest that the HO/T lanes chiefly serve occasional users who ante up when time is pressing. The study also found that travelers of all income levels use the toll lanes. 25% of the lowest income travelers reported that they use the toll lanes “on a frequent basis.” Overall, the study found widespread public acceptance of the HO/T concept.

This innovative approach used on SR-91 merits consideration on NYC’s congested roads, including our region’s underused HOV lanes. The politics of road pricing in the parts of the U.S. where it has been discussed suggest that certain **interest groups**, rather than the public at large, are the biggest **blockers of road pricing experiments**. The NY chapter of the AAA repeated its shop-worn “higher peak time tolls will punish motorists and be “grossly unfair” mantra again in its magazine this month.

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



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Calendar

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. 14 5:30pm Metro-North Commuter Council President’s Forum: Daniel Scannell, Acting President, MTA Metro-North Railroad. 347 Madison Ave., 5th floor. Manhattan. 212-878-7087

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.

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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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.