

# Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

Number 241

October 15, 1999

## NEWS

### NJ DOT Discusses Some Bond Act Projects, Still Nothing in Writing

With only 18 days to go until election day, the New Jersey Dept. of Transportation has still not released a list of the projects its proposed \$500 million transportation bond issue will pay for. **NJ voters** will be asked to **approve the measure on November's ballot**. State sales tax receipts will be used to pay the bond off.

The bond issue was introduced in the legislature in the spring as funding for the state to reduce a backlog of bridge maintenance and reconstruction problems. But in June, the legislature amended the bond issue to a split between local bridge repair and general capital funding for NJ DOT projects. Since then, the Tri-State Campaign has called on DOT to **tell the public** what it will spend its half of the bond revenues on.

DOT said at first it would not issue a project list, but in the last week has begun to mention specific projects that the bond issue would finance.

NJ Transportation Commissioner James Weinstein told the *Bergen Record* last weekend that \$80 million would pay for upgrading NJ Transit's Union Township station and the Hoboken rail yard and tunnel work for the Hudson-Bergen light rail. Weinstein said another \$10 million would go to bike and pedestrian projects, and that **none of the remaining \$160 million** would be used for widening highways. "**No widening...we have to find viable alternatives for people, and that's rail and light rail,**" the Commissioner said.

The Campaign was encouraged by the Commissioner's comments, but remains concerned that no formal, public list has been released so close to the vote.

Commissioner Weinstein has been stumping for the bond issue this week, emphasizing the need to fix local bridges. The Commissioner apparently told reporters Thursday that DOT would make a clear project list available in "four or five days." New Jersey's voters are waiting.

### New Jersey's Blank Bond Act

**18**

days until New Jersey voters will be asked to vote on **\$250 million** worth of transportation bonds for which **no project list or spending plan** has been publicly released.

Another \$250 million will be devoted to local bridge repair.

### Funds for Big NY Rail Projects at Risk? Or Just an Albany Pressure Tactic?

The *NY Observer* ran a front-page article this week warning that New York could lose federal funding for both the Second Avenue Subway and the Long Island Railroad link to Grand Central Terminal if an agreement on the MTA's 2000-2004 capital program proposal is not in place by February. The article did not explain the February deadline, and cited only "Washington insiders" who insisted vaguely that the MTA and New York's political leaders had better get moving and strike a deal.

A number of individuals familiar with federal transit funding and MTA capital programming told the Campaign **the argument is a lot of smoke**. They said past MTA capital program proposals have hung in political limbo for extended periods without any federal funding repercussions, and noted that New York City newspapers had exaggerated the import of the "not recommended" rating received by the LIRR-Grand Central project in the Federal Transit Administration's "New Starts" report last fall (see *MTR* #219). If the capital program becomes deadlocked for a year or more, that could cause problems for a project of the LIRR-GCT's scale, according to the Campaign's sources. But any real deadline is **well past February**, they said.

Some said the report appeared to be an attempt to **set up an artificial deadline** with which to pressure NY State Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver into an **early deal** over the MTA plan. Any real prospect of a withdrawal of federal support for the big New York projects would trigger a monumental political battle in Washington that the Clinton Administration could be drawn into.

Silver has said he will approve the MTA capital program only if it includes plans for a Second Avenue Subway that will run the entire length of Manhattan. The MTA capital program proposal includes NYC Transit's 125th Street-63rd Street Upper East Side "stubway" plan. MTA leaders have taken to calling the uptown segment a "first phase" of a longer line. But they say their plan wouldn't complete the stub line until 2015, and the project's draft environmental impact statement contains **no plans for later phases**.

The Empire State Transportation Alliance, a coalition of civic, environmental labor and business groups, has called for a \$2 billion investment in the Second Avenue subway and \$1.5 billion for the LIRR-Grand Central project during the 2000-2004 MTA program. The coali-

tion says these levels would allow both projects to be completed together in 2012 (MTR #236). If finished in advance of a major addition to east side subway

capacity, the LIRR-Grand Central project threatens to swamp the already-jammed Lexington Avenue subway with thousands more riders per day.

### Renovation Secured by NY Assembly Rescues Brooklyn Subway From Collapse

Some Brooklyn subway riders will enjoy the fruits of a past NY State Assembly stand on the transit capital program starting Monday. The **Franklin Avenue Shuttle**, the short subway line that connects the A/C and D/Q lines in Bedford-Stuyvesant and Crown Heights, will reopen after closing in July, 1998 for a thorough reconstruction.

The rebuilt line features a new connection to the 2/3/4/5 lines at the Botanic Garden station and new platforms, lighting, escalators, elevators, transfer points and MetroCard vending machines. Some stations have been made more accessible for wheelchairs. The job is wrapping up three and a half months ahead of schedule.

The Straphangers Campaign hailed the line's re-birth, stating: "The big winners are the city's transit system, the thousands of riders served by the line, and the community activists and elected officials who won a \$74 million overhaul of the shuttle against great odds."

NY State Assembly leaders, led by Albert Vann, who represents the district that includes the Shuttle, and

Catherine Nolan, who represents the Assembly on the MTA Capital Program Review Board, **refused to approve the MTA's 1995-1999 capital program** until the Shuttle reconstruction project was included.

The MTA had removed the Shuttle from the capital program in 1994 and planned to shut it down and replace it with buses. Years of neglect had permitted the line to fall into an appalling state of disrepair. Still, in 1995, the Shuttle carried 10,000 people per day, more than the LIRR's Oyster Bay Branch. The MTA did close the Shuttle's Dean Street station, the first subway station closed since 1962.

### East Harlem Spotlights Clean Bus Cause

About 200 East Harlem residents rallied to oppose the reopening of NYC Transit's E. 100th Street bus depot yesterday. The demonstration was led by NYC City Council member Phillip Reed and State Assembly member Nelson Dennis. The MTA plans to reopen and expand the depot, which was closed last year. The demonstrators pointed to East Harlem's very high asthma rate and the fact that Harlem hosts most of the bus depots in Manhattan.

"It's going to remain a bus depot. We need it now more than ever," MTA representative Al O'Leary told the *Daily News*, citing ridership pressure on NYC Transit's bus fleet.

Environmental, civic and business groups have called on the MTA to invest more in compressed natural gas (CNG) buses and fueling facilities, and to stop buying diesel buses. The Natural Resources Defense Council points out that the MTA's capital program proposal includes construction of two new diesel bus depots and expansion of six others, including the E. 100th Street site. The depot work and need for bus fleet expansion are opportunities the MTA could use to move decisively away from reliance on diesels, but the agency's planned CNG bus purchases may not even keep pace with the fleet's expansion.

Pressure from neighborhood and city-wide environmental groups on the clean-fuel bus issue is expected to increase as the legislature weighs the capital program proposal. For more information, see [www.nrdc.org](http://www.nrdc.org)

### Gowanus Resolution a Distant Prospect

At a Sept. meeting of Brooklyn Community Board 6, a NYC DOT official said plans to replace the elevated Gowanus Expressway with a tunnel were "dead."

It was unclear whether the official, who was presenting plans for rebuilding the Hamilton Avenue Bridge — a project that would be considerably affected by the various schemes for the Expressway under consideration — was reflecting a **city policy** to head off serious consideration of a Gowanus tunnel or a **transportation**

### Harbor Truck Tunnel Headed South

The idea of allowing trucks in the proposed cross-Harbor rail freight tunnel suffered another setback yesterday, when it was revealed that such a move would **fail to provide even short term congestion relief**, as proponents had maintained. Adding trucks to the rail tunnel had previously been shown to depress rail usage in the region to levels below those that would occur if no tunnel were built and if there had been no takeover of Conrail by CSX and Norfolk-Southern.

Yesterday, a consultant to the NYC Economic Development Corp. presented evidence to the EDC's Cross-Harbor Freight Advisory Committee that the highway network in the urban core is so cramped that providing more space through a **new Hudson crossing for trucks would only worsen conditions** on connecting roadways, especially in NJ. EDC staff reported that agencies pushing for trucks in the tunnel have agreed tentatively to drop the idea if the Federal Highway Administration approves of the study's methodology.

A piece still missing from EDC's cross-Harbor study is the impact of time-of-day pricing on truck traffic as an alternative or complement to new rail freight infrastructure. EDC staff says it would be hard pressed to move forward on this analysis without the help of the agencies controlling the New York-New Jersey crossings. While recent history suggests this is an enormous obstacle to progress, the Port Authority is showing signs of moving forward with analyses of toll policy innovations. The PA has said it would prefer to work jointly with the with the MTA in this area, but any MTA work on roadway pricing seems completely stalled.

**agency consensus** in opposition to the tunnel, or was simply misinformed. According to the *Brooklyn Heights Press*, a NY State DOT spokesperson present at the Community Board meeting disavowed the city official's statement. State Senator Martin Connor has asked the State DOT to help win an agreement from the city to hold off on any plan for the Hamilton Ave. Bridge until the future of the Gowanus is settled.

That could be some time. The State DOT has pushed the **completion date** for its Gowanus reconstruction draft environmental impact statement off to **2002**. It has also convened a Gowanus tunnel technical advisory panel. Settlement of a lawsuit against the State DOT and the FHWA (see *MTR* #153) over the project's planning procedures by community and transportation reform groups is still being negotiated.

### **NJ Ped Safety Demand Outstrips Budget**

At a conference on New Jersey pedestrian issues today, the Tri-State Transportation Campaign's Greg Meyer, laid out the case for **additional funding for pedestrian safety** and accessibility projects in the State.

This year, New Jersey has allocated \$4.7 million for pedestrian projects. Of that sum, a bit over half will be dedicated to five pilot pedestrian projects in Newark and Irvington (see *MTR* #232), leaving **\$2.2 million to be allocated** for local pedestrian project proposal. Competition for the money will be stiff – 206 project applications, **requesting a total of \$30 million**, have been submitted this year. Next year, DOT plans to add federal Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality (CMAQ) funds worth \$6 million to pedestrian safety efforts, but it is still a far cry from the amount needed even to service municipal demand, let alone retrofit lethal corridors such as Routes 9, 22, or 37.

Frank Brady, a manager for NJDOT, concurred with the Campaign's assessment, saying, "Is it enough? No."

Meyer also pointed out that Governor Whitman has made cutting pedestrian fatalities in half a major policy priority, but that NJ state-wide pedestrian fatalities increased 9 percent last year.

Meyer focused on three funding areas that could supply more dollars for pedestrian projects. First, he said that CMAQ funding could be dramatically scaled up for both bicycle and pedestrian projects. Under TEA-21, NJ will receive about **\$80 million per year** from CMAQ. Second, federal "hazard elimination" funds, which are now being used in NY and California for pedestrian safety, should be used similarly in New Jersey (NJDOT has said it would look into doing so). Finally, the state Transportation Trust Fund, which supplies moneys for the pedestrian program now, needs to deliver \$20 million per year for pedestrians, which would still amount to **less than 1%** of the Trust Fund.

The conference, "Walk NJ," was organized by the Rutgers Transportation Policy Institute and the NJ Chapter of the American Planning Association.

*MTR*#241 Contributing: Therese Langer, Greg Meyer Editor: Jon Orcutt Executive Director, Janine Bauer

**240 West 35th Street #801, 2nd Floor, New York, NY 10001 tel. 212-268-7474 fax 212-268-7333 email**

## **Calendar**

**Oct. 18, 1pm** North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority meeting. 1 Newark Center, 17th floor. 973-639-8406.

**Oct 20, 1pm** NYC Council Committee on Environmental Protection hearing on NYC Dept. of Sanitation interim waste export contracts. Council Chambers, NYC City Hall. 212-788-7210

**Oct. 21, 1:15pm** NY Metropolitan Transportation Council program and administration committee, 1 World Trade Center, #82e. 212-938-3300.

**Oct. 21 5:30pm** Clean Air/Truck Safety Rally, to call for zero tolerance of oversize, overweight trucks and resist NYC's truck-based garbage export strategy. Trees Not Trucks, Transportation Alternatives, Right-of-Way. Corner of Broome and Lafayette Streets, Manhattan. 212-343-2881

**Oct. 25, 9:30am** MTA Capital Program Oversight Committee, 347 Madison Ave., Manhattan. 5th floor. 212-878-7178.

**Oct. 26, 6-8pm** MTA/Long Island Railroad East Side Access Project citizens advisory committee. 347 Madison Ave. 5th floor. 718-558-7520.

**Oct. 27, 9am** MTA Board meeting, 347 Madison Ave., Manhattan. 5th floor. 212-878-7178.

**Oct. 28, 8am-3pm** "Leveraging Train Stations to Build Better Communities." NJ Transit/Downtown NJ workshop. Hackensack University Medical Center, 30 Prospect Ave. Reserve by Oct. 25. \$908-218-7778 DNJInc@aol.com

**Nov. 4, 5:30-7:30pm** Long Island Railroad Commuter Council President's Forum, w/ LIRR President Thomas Prendergast. 347 Madison Ave., Manhattan. 5th floor. 212-878-7087.

**Nov. 4, 8pm** Milwaukee Mayor John Norquist ("the urban superhighway should be relegated to the scrap heap of history") on "Downtowns in America in the 21st Century." Cooper Union Great Hall, 7 East 7th Street, Manhattan. Info: 212-353-4195.

Visit the Tri-State Transportation Campaign Web Site:

**www.tstc.org**

- Features searchable database of all past editions of *Mobilizing the Region*

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



*Mobilizing the Region*