

Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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February 4, 2000

NEWS

EPA Won't Budge on Route 92

This week, EPA Regional Administrator Jeanne Fox sent a letter to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers reaffirming EPA's **opposition to construction** of Route 92. The letter again pressed the Corps to require the Turnpike Authority to submit a full federal environmental impact statement (EIS) for the project before issuing the wetlands permits needed to begin building the 6.7 mile limited-access toll highway through an undeveloped portion of southern Middlesex County. The EPA has denied the project a wetlands permit twice since 1998 and agrees with local leaders and residents that less harmful and pavement-intensive solutions to the area's east-west traffic flow problems could be implemented.

EPA said its letter was prompted by confusion caused by a December *NY Times* article that reported a **Corps attempt to reclassify** a portion of the wetlands at issue. The Corps' permit chief told the *South Brunswick Post* a week after the *Times* piece appeared that reclassification was still under review. Although the Corps has told reporters and officials that a permit decision is close, it appears more likely the debate will be protracted.

If the Corps decides in favor of the project, the EPA may appeal the ruling to the Assistant Secretary of the Army for review. If further disagreement ensues, the issue will be put before the federal Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) for arbitration.

— Bigger Picture Not Forgotten —

Princeton Packet columnist Hank Kalet focused this week on the broader context and implications of Route 92 construction. He said Governor's Whitman's support for the highway's construction contradicted of her concern to **reduce sprawl** and her work to preserve New Jersey open space. Kalet noted that "while Route 92 is being sold as an antidote to traffic congestion, it holds out the real threat of **increased commercial development and the traffic that comes with it.**" His piece pointed to building booms and traffic overloads in Somerset, Morris and Passaic counties following the openings of I-78 and I-287 as examples of new roads that increased regional levels of traffic and congestion.

The Tri-State Transportation Campaign Web Site

www.tstc.org

• New this week: Link to "Subway Schmutz III," the Straphangers Campaign's line-by-line survey of subway car cleanliness.

NJ: Show Us The Money, Part II — DOT Double-cross Developing? —

Statewide and regional environmental groups agreed last week to endorse a proposal to amend New Jersey's Transportation Trust Fund statute to **tie spending by NJDOT to specific investment targets**, such as fixing bridges, improving road surfaces, halving pedestrian fatalities and building the network of bikeways Gov. Whitman promised in her 1998 inaugural address.

The move came on the heels of NJDOT's request to the Legislature, a week earlier, to remove \$46 million from the bill implementing the \$500 million November bond issue. \$17 million of money is all of the bond's rail freight, bicycle and pedestrian projects. Now, none of the bond money for these areas will be used for projects in 2000. At the urging of Tri-State Campaign director Janine Bauer, DOT Commissioner Jim Weinstein promised the committee that the rest of the bond money would be used in 2001. Now, even that is unclear. Also unraveling over the last two weeks was **DOT's promise** in the fall that the \$500 million bond monies, even if spent over 2000 and 2001, would be **additive to the Transportation Trust Fund**, not used to replace Trust Fund or federal dollars.

NJ's draft TIP for 2001 (beginning in July, 2000) has been released and clearly shows that bond monies are being used, partially or in full, to replace funds previously programmed in the TIP for particular projects and programs. And officials at this week's DOT Bicycle Advisory Committee meeting confirmed that the bond monies would not be added to Trust Fund and other sources, but would replace them in certain instances — though at least one official indicated that there was dissent within the department regarding this course.

Unless corrected in further legislative hearings or at the MPOs, DOT's maneuver will cause a net loss for the projects and programs the Tri-State Campaign fought for last year — \$18 million for rail freight will fall to \$15 million; \$12 million for cycling projects reduced to \$7 million, and \$9 million for pedestrian safety cut to \$5 million. The lesser figures are exactly the amounts programmed in last year's TIP, before the bond bill even passed the Legislature. A rumor is circulating that rail freight will be further cut back to \$10 million. Even roadway repair projects could be endangered.

Critics of the bond issue last year claimed that getting a program and project list from NJ DOT was not enough, because DOT would use the appeal of sustain-

able projects to obtain voter approval, and then use Trust Fund monies to continue to widen highways. And a few controversial projects seem to be gaining momentum. A resolution endorsing the construction of Rt. 55 in southern NJ, a 20-mile new alignment highway that would cut right through two state forests, is moving in the state legislature next week. Maybe the critics were right. If so, **spending controls** are an absolute must in the renewal and reform of the Trust Fund.

New Jersey Ped, Cyclist Funding Still Low

Last week, NJ DOT released this year's list of local **pedestrian and bicycling projects** that will receive **NJ DOT local aid funding**. As in other recent award cycles, municipal demand far exceeded the supply of dollars made available by DOT. The Dept. received 314 grant applications for amounts totaling more than \$50 million — slightly more than last year's requests — demonstrating continued enthusiasm for such projects.

The 97 projects selected for funding include completion of the portion of the Trenton-Palmyra Heritage Trail through Burlington City, traffic calming in Westfield, and bike paths in Hillsborough.

1999 traffic fatality figures show that NJ localities still need more money for similar projects (*MTR #251*). While streets became safer for motorists last year, bike and pedestrian fatalities - **at 24% of all traffic fatalities in the Garden State** - held steady. In 1998, Governor Whitman established the goal to cut pedestrian deaths in half by 2010. Increasing the the NJDOT set-aside for pedestrian and cycling projects would help to give attainment of the promise a worthwhile chance.

Though late with E-ZPass, NJ Leads in Developing its Potential

The NJ Turnpike will mark a milestone this summer when it opens the region's first high-speed electronic toll collection facility. The Turnpike has relocated its Interchange 6, which connects to the Pennsylvania Turnpike. The new plaza will have one high-speed lane for each direction that will allow E-ZPass equipped motorists to **pass through at 50 mph**. E-ZPass readers will be installed this spring or early summer.

Most of the region's older toll plazas force drivers with E-ZPass to stop or slow to a 5 mph crawl, depriving the highway system of the seamlessness that electronic toll technology promises. One analysis found that a non-stop toll lane moves 600 more cars per hour than a old-style booth retro-fitted with E-Z Pass.

NJ Assembly Transportation Chair Alex DeCroce has revived the "**Parkway Barrier Toll Removal**" bill, and State Senator Robert Martin has also re-introduced its companion bill. Backed by transportation reformers and environmentalists, the bill would require the Garden State Parkway to reconfigure for non-stop toll collection at plazas where E-Z Pass market share reaches 2/3rds of toll-paying vehicles. Cash-payers would pay a 15-cent toll surcharge to pay for the overhaul.

Bypass No Remedy to Windsor Traffic Woes

A January *Trenton Times* article reported that north-south traffic and truck traffic from all directions remain heavy on Route 33 in East Windsor Township, despite the touted November opening of a 4-lane bypass that cuts through the remaining semi-rural open space north of Hightstown (eastern Mercer County, near the NJ Turnpike). The bypass does seem to have reduced east-west traffic, especially at rush hour, according to Hightstown Mayor Amy Aughenbaugh. Throughout a five-year fight against the road by area residents, bypass supporters argued that the new 4-mile highway would take heavy traffic off of Route 33, which runs through the heart of Hightstown.

NJ DOT documents on the project predicted the bypass' lackluster showing. DOT's EIS anticipated that the bypass would attract roughly 55,000 cars and trucks per day, **just 22% of Hightstown traffic** in 1994, and surely a significantly lower percentage today.

The EIS also offered estimates that the Bypass would lure over 2 million square feet of **commercial and industrial real estate development** to the farmland along its course. These new office parks, malls, and storage facilities will bring new traffic to the region, probably boosting both bypass and downtown traffic alike. Town leaders hoped the project would spur the revitalization of downtown Hightstown, but it may end up transforming it into the traffic-laden crossroads of a sprawling area of sprawling development.



Thruway Toll Hike: Minor Political Football, Sensible Policy

The NY State Thruway Authority's quiet plan to **index tolls to construction labor and material costs** and raise them in a series of minor increases over the next few years (see *MTR #254*) fell prey to the political squabble between State Senate Majority Leader Joseph Bruno and Governor Pataki this week. Bruno blasted the plan as a tax increase and criticized the Thruway for not revealing that the plan was in the works earlier.

The possible increase, 1.8% this year for distance-based tolls, would not affect fixed-toll barriers around NYC and Buffalo, would help pay for a capital program that includes toll plaza work to permit higher-speed E-ZPass transactions. The hike could also provide a context for introducing an anti-congestion **time-variable toll schedule at the Tappan Zee Bridge**. The higher tolls could go into effect this summer. Public hearings on the plan are likely this spring.

LIRR East Side Access: Notes from Underground

Documents summarizing recent discussions of the MTA's Technical Advisory Committee to the LIRR East Side Access project shed light on the soon-to-be unveiled draft EIS for the LIRR-Grand Central link. The LIRR-GCT EIS is being fast-tracked — a draft is

scheduled for release next month, with hearings slated for March. The agency expects a decision on the project from the Federal Transit Administration by August.

The two choices considered for the new tunnel con-

Financing NY's Suburban & Upstate Transit

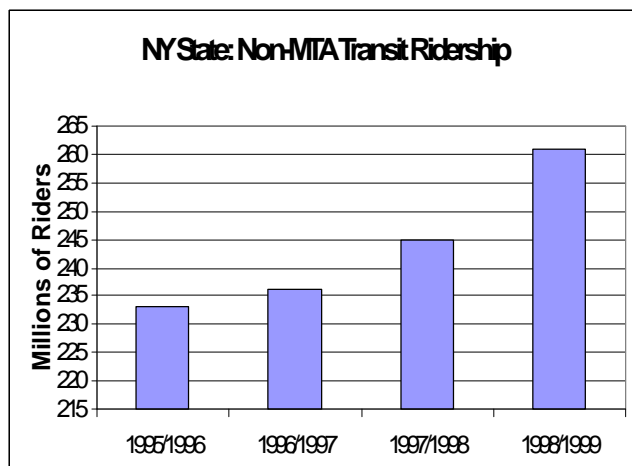
"Transit 2000," a legislative proposal by the NY Public Transit Association (NYPTA), calls for 5-year capital funding for **non-MTA public transportation systems** in New York of \$170 million, and proposes a new multi-year operating assistance program that would total \$1.5 billion during 2000-2004.

The five-year transportation program proposed in Governor Pataki's new executive budget would give \$146 million in capital funding to the smaller transit systems. NYPTA's figure — \$24 million more than the Governor's — was reached by surveying needs studies for all of the state's transit systems outside the MTA. With the exception of Buffalo's Niagara Frontier Transportation Authority, which operates a light rail system, the systems are bus-based. The capital budget is thus largely for bus purchases and related costs.

The operating program proposal would secure a more stable future for the state's transit systems, which now must rely on fluctuating annual appropriations for state operating aid. Governor Pataki's proposed budget reduces total state operating aid for most of NY's smaller transit system (see *MTR* #254), for a total \$16.5 million cut. If the Governor's proposed level for non-MTA transit operations were extended from his proposal for this year, the 5-year level would be \$1.04 billion, about 2/3 of NYPTA's needs assessment.

NY State transit systems **enjoyed a multi-year operating assistance plan** from 1993/94 to 1996/97. Since 1997, the state has provided operating assistance on an annual basis, "but at **unpredictable levels which do not allow long term strategic planning,**" said NYPTA.

The document also says that despite non-MTA transit's 3% share of the State's Dedicated Transportation Trust Fund (for capital funding), "a significant backlog of buses and other capital improvements remains unaddressed." **NYPTA: 518-434-9060, www.nypta.org**



necting the 63rd Street East River tunnel to Grand Central are the "semi-deep" and "deep" options. Under the "semi-deep" scenario, LIRR trains would run into the terminal in a new tunnel directly below the existing Metro-North Park Avenue tunnel. The over-under proximity would require significant undergirding of Metro-North's tracks, causing significant **construction impacts on regular MNRR service.** It would also impact buildings along Park Ave., 53rd St., and 55th St., including taking commercial space for site access. Although sending the tunnel deeper would mean blasting through the bedrock seventy feet below the existing tunnel, the "deep" option is projected to cost \$400 million less because it avoids these extra costs.



Whichever tunnel option is chosen, the documents confirm that LIRR service to Grand Central will create transportation challenges for both Long Island station towns and transit Manhattan's East Side. LIRR believes that due to the new service, most **rail stations in Nassau and Suffolk** will receive between 20 to 70 **more auto trips** during peak hours (200 more for Ronkonkoma). These extra cars will further pack already tight station parking lots. Discussions of strategies to counter this crowding seem to have been limited thus far to pouring more asphalt and raising more parking decks. Towns should consider investing in jitney or bus services to bring commuters from homes to stations, and improving pedestrian and bicycle station access (see *MTR* #254).

More LIRR riders will also further exacerbate elbow-in-rib conditions on the Lexington Avenue line. The hardest hit subways will be the southbound #4 and #5 trains, where an additional 1,800 passengers are expected during morning peak commutes, and the northbound #6, that will add 700 additional passengers. Over the entire morning peak, the **Lexington line** may be forced to **carry 7,300 more people**, raising its level of over-capacity from 112% to 117%. In fact, these numbers may be low, as the LIRR also plans to **reduce the number of Atlantic Avenue trains** from 16 to 10 once they begin routing trains to Grand Central. Riders who usually travel to Atlantic Ave. and transfer to lower Manhattan-bound subways there may end up at Grand Central instead, and further pack the Lex.

The memos reveal that NYC Transit is considering addition of another express train to Lexington line service during the morning rush hours, which — according to previous statements made by the agency — would require expensive signal and interlocking improvements. But one extra train many years hence seems like weak medicine for East Side riders already jammed beyond tolerable conditions.

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Acela's Piecemeal Debut

After months of being inveighed to “depart from inhibitions” by a cryptic and usually incomprehensible ad campaign for Amtrak’s promised high-speed “Acela” service, travelers in the northeast finally have the opportunity to get on board. Four months late, Amtrak unveiled four-hour “Acela Regional” service between NYC and Boston last week, a small piece of its \$2.6 billion **inter-city express train system** that in theory will extend to well-traveled corridors in the Great Lakes, Southeast, Gulf Coast, California, and Pacific Northwest. Now running twice a day, the faster trip is the result of electrification of Amtrak’s line between Boston and New Haven. The lack of electric infrastructure north of New Haven had required a lengthy mid-journey switch to diesel locomotives.

Still indefinitely delayed is the “Acela Express,” a 150 mph service that is to shave two hours off the previously 5-hour NYC-Boston trip and 35-40 minutes from 3-hour NYC-Washington Metroliner service. Wheel-track compatibility problems continue to keep the express locomotives in testing. Though a builders’ request last week to push back the train’s inaugural run to mid-July was denied by its board of directors, Amtrak officials acknowledge they **have no idea when the first train will be delivered**. Eventually, the company hopes to run as many as seven regional and ten express trains per day between Boston and NYC.

Under a 1997 Federal law, Amtrak must **fund its own operating budget by the end of 2002 or face liquidation**. Federal appropriations would continue for capital projects. Amtrak is pumping the majority of its capital resources into its high-speed service, hoping that Acela will lure enough travelers off the roads and shuttle planes to bring solvency. Optimists focus on New England, where Amtrak carries less than 30% of NYC-Boston rail and plane travelers, compared to its 70% market share in the NYC-DC corridor. But the outlook doesn’t look good. Amtrak has claimed it was only \$480 million shy of breaking even last year — an impressive gain over previous years — but a report released last week by the Congressionally appointed Amtrak Reform Council pegged its deficit at almost twice that amount.

Critics say that the company has functioned in the red since its inception, consuming \$22 billion in federal subsidies over the last three decades. To others, Congress’ demand is unreasonable — no high-speed train system in the world operates without government subsidy. And no other form of transit or highway system in the U.S. does either, for that matter.

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



Mobilizing the Region

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Calendar

Feb. 7 6-8pm "The City's New Zoning Proposal: Bandage or Cure-All?" - NYC Bar Assn, w/ City Planning Commission chair Joe Rose, others. 42 West 44th St. 212-382-6600 www.abcny.org

Feb. 8, 10am NY State Legislature joint hearing on transportation elements of Governor Pataki's 2000-2001 executive budget, State Capitol, Albany Hearing Room B, 518-455-3851

Feb. 8, 6pm Meeting of the Nassau HUB Citizens Advisory Committee, Hofstra University Club at Hofstra, 516-541-4321

Feb. 9, 7pm Organizing meeting for NYC waste prevention coalition. INFORM, 120 Wall St. 16th fl, Manhattan. 212-361-2400 culver@informinc.org

Feb 10, 10am-Noon "Brownfields and Community Development" seminar and roundtable w/ Mathy Stanislaus, Ron Shiffman, others. Kaplan Center for NYC Affairs, New School. 65 5th Ave., 2nd floor, Manhattan. 212-989-0633.

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

Feb. 28-29 NY Public Transit Ass. Winter Conference, Crowne Plaza, Albany, NY, 518-434-9060

Feb. 16, 7:30 pm CT Rail Commuter Council Meeting, CDOT Offices, Bridgeport Railroad Station, www.trainweb/ct, 1-800-842-8299

February 25, 9:30am "Economics of Amtrak: Choices w/in the Policy Framework." John Bennett, Amtrak VP. Oval Room, 1 World Trade Center, 43rd floor, Manhattan. University Transportation Research Center, 212-650-8050.

March 21, 6 pm Chamber of Commerce of the Nyacks general membership meeting and panel discussion: "The Tappan Zee Bridge? Nyack Needs to Know." Seaport Center, 21 Burd St. 914-353-2221 coc@spyral.net

March 23, 7pm Public Forum to examine the I-287 Task Force Report and to discuss the future of the Tappan-Zee Bridge sponsored by Assemblyman Alexander Gromack, Assemblyman Sam Colman and Senator Tom Morahan, Rockland Community College, 914-634-9791

March 24 Congressman Ben Gilman's town meeting on transportation issues. With Governor Pataki's Rockland County aide. Time, location TBA. 914-343-6666.