

Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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NEWS

New Jersey DOT Road Expansion Pollutes the Delaware

All was not quiet on Trenton's Delaware River waterfront this week as the Army Corps of Engineers (Phila. District) halted the NJ Dept. of Transportation Route 29 construction project because DOT violated permit conditions. The intrusive highway is being built in the open waters of the Delaware, in the path of the migrating shad and Atlantic sturgeon who spawn upriver, just as the Lambertville shadfest is about to get underway. The shadfest has made Lambertville area a large tourist attraction every spring. DOT is only allowed to work in the river from Dec. 1 to March 14 to avoid the running shad. But the permit was inexplicably extended, and DOT's sloppy practices caused silt to cloud the channel.

"It shows the folly of constructing highways along waterfronts," Tri-State Campaign director Janine Bauer told the *Trenton Times*.

Environmentalists, including the Delaware Riverkeeper, citizens' groups and Pennsylvania officials had warned New Jersey regulators in 1998 that **Rte. 29's construction could not proceed without massive habitat destruction**, and a NJ Dept. of Environmental Protection biologist who so testified at a Tidelands Resource Council hearing was barred from testifying at a later hearing by his bosses. The Corps has fined DOT \$25,000, a pittance compared to DOT's annual budget and the harm to the community the \$94 million project has already caused.

The environmental violation will delay the project's completion, **causing even more traffic disruption in the Trenton area** than the project was slated to result in already. The Route 29 project was spotlighted last fall in a national report by the Surface Transportation Policy Project that found that motorists can lose more time in road construction delays than they will save in years of driving on the newly "improved" road. A case study in the paper showed that traffic delays stemming from Route 29 construction will be so long and ongoing that **it will take ten years for drivers to make up the time lost** and actually benefit from the project.

Tri-State's lawsuit over the tidelands permit DEP issued to NJ DOT to construct Route 29 is pending in the state appeals court. The case should be argued soon.

NY Legislature Proposes \$17.1 billion Highway Plan, Mountain of MTA Debt

— Program Details, Budget Math Cloudy —

In announcing a state budget agreement "framework" on Wednesday, NY legislative leaders and Governor Pataki said they would deal with the demands of financing 5-year transit and road programs by **putting a \$3.8 billion general obligation bond issue before the state's voters this November**. If the bond act is approved, the deal would set the MTA and NY State DOT 5-year capital budgets at a \$17.1 billion "parity" level, although the formula does not include the roughly \$2 billion that the NY State Thruway Authority and MTA Bridges and Tunnels plan to invest in highways over the same period. Nor does it compare the fiscal soundness of the two programs — the MTA plan relies very heavily on new fare-backed debt. The bond act proposal is a record high for NY State.

Silver and Bruno said the bond issue proceeds would be split evenly between highways and transit. However, the increase of the transit budget from the MTA's original \$16.5 billion capital program to the \$17.1 billion level is modest against the nearly \$3 billion hike in the NY State DOT budget over Governor Pataki's \$14.3 billion executive budget recommendation. It's unclear for now where the various legislative plans for cutting the state gas tax sit amid the new budget framework.

Legislative leaders in both houses claimed victory for their transportation efforts. Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver and other Manhattan legislators said the deal would put the Second Avenue Subway on track, even though **huge questions loom about financing the project's construction** in the future. Less questionable is that the State Senate has won a big boost in highway funding, backed by solid NY State tax revenues.

Transit program specifics are reportedly still being worked out:

- News reports and statements by Speaker Silver indicate that about \$1 billion in the transit plan will be devoted to full-length Second Avenue subway planning, engineering and possibly early phases of construction (construction of a full-length line is estimated to cost about \$15 billion).
- Whether the plan will require NYC Transit to undertake a significant conversion of its bus fleet to clean compressed natural gas buses is still under debate in Albany. **Assembly Democrats are pushing hard for a "dump diesel" position**. The big question here is

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where Governor Pataki will come out on this one.

Details — indeed, even shadowy outlines — of the highway program are completely absent. Where the public debate over transit issues has been over fairly specific programs and projects, discussion about highways has been primarily in dollar terms. What will the expanded NY State DOT program pay for? This year, DOT has refrained from releasing even a basic outline of its program under the Governor's proposed \$14.3 billion funding level or any other scenario.

The bond act plan has been criticized for what it might do for highway construction and for what it may not do for mass transit.

Criticism by the Straphangers Campaign and the NYC Partnership after the budget framework was announced focused on the fact that general state bond act **would place a small layer of good money on top of an unstable mountain of MTA debt.** A front-page story in

Reports Map Highway Industry Goals

Reports released last month by New York and New Jersey highway industry groups provide a sense of the priorities of this powerful constituency for expanded state DOT spending. Their message is that rough roads and congestion are costing drivers intolerable amounts of both time and money. Their solution is more public spending on highways, but the devil is in the details.

Reports for the "Crisis Program," a lobbying project of the NY Associated General Contractors, call for \$17 billion for maintenance of state-owned roadways and bridges and **another \$9 billion in reconstruction for "congestion-related widening"** and remedies for "excessively narrow lanes" and "excessively narrow shoulder widths."

Though timed to influence the capital plan debate in Albany, the big numbers appear to represent more of a highway expansion-oriented overall needs assessment rather than a realistic 5-year plan. For comparison, the 20-year MTA needs assessment estimated by the Regional Plan Association comes to over \$60 billion.

- New Jersey: Balanced Objectives? -

In a report for the New Jersey Alliance for Action, researchers at the NJ Institute of Technology used data from a Texas Transportation Institute report on comparative congestion in the United States to estimate that traffic jam delays cost New Jersey drivers \$4.9 billion last year — \$880 per licensed driver. The greatest delays and costs were found to be in Somerset, Bergen, Morris, Monmouth, and Middlesex counties.

The report concludes that the solution to congestion in NJ must be "a balance between construction of new highway and transit facilities." But **the most concrete suggestions given are to widen highways.** The report's estimates of time savings for commuters do not reflect time costs of delays caused by construction or the amount of extra cars and trucks, and traffic-generating sprawl development that widening will impose on routes undergoing significant work.

Action on MTA projects, bus and subway service

www.bettertransit.org



Tuesday's *NY Times* described the untenable levels of fare-backed borrowing the MTA capital program proposes. According to the article, 11 cents in every dollar in transit fares is now used to repay MTA debt. Under the MTA 2000-2004 plan, **that share would rise to 23 cents in 2004 and keep rising** thereafter. "A vote for this plan is a vote for a massive fare hike," the Straphangers Campaign's Gene Russianoff told the *NY Times* upon release of the state budget outline.

A number of downstate business and advocacy leaders are calling upon Governor Pataki to establish a blue ribbon commission to advise the state in developing more sustainable financing for mass transit.

A letter sent today to legislative and Pataki Administration leaders today from major environmental groups, including Environmental Advocates, Environmental Defense, the Long Island Pine Barrens Society and the Tri-State Transportation Campaign asked for details of the NY State DOT highway and bridge program, and said that the groups **would not support an expanded highway budget** if NYS DOT's program contains a significant highway expansion component.

NJ Transit: Bus World's Biggest Mistake

On Wednesday, NJ Transit's Board of Directors approved purchase of 1,400 new diesel-powered cruiser buses, thought likely to be the world's largest single bus order. The first of a number of staggered deliveries of the buses will arrive 15 months from now. Overall, the purchase will replace almost all of the agency's long-distance fleet. NJ Transit is also close to completing replacement of more than one-third of its regular transit buses, used on shorter, urban routes. With these decisions, the agency has ensured that the large majority of its buses **will continue to release toxic and ozone-inducing diesel emissions** for decades to come.

Exposure to the fine particulates in diesel exhaust has been repeatedly associated by medical experts with the onset or aggravation of asthma and other respiratory infections. **Not only do these particulates coat the lungs, they are also carcinogenic.** International health monitoring organizations from the World Health Organization to the US EPA and the California Air Resources Board have all described diesel exhaust as some form of carcinogen.

Bus fleets around the country have already committed themselves to "no more diesel" bus purchase policies, including Nassau County's Long Island Bus, the NYC DOT franchise fleet and the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority. Nation-wide, buses powered by

clean compressed gas (CNG) make up 31% of all new transit bus purchases.

Nassau County's Transit Lobby

Last Tuesday's public hearing at the Nassau County Medical Center on the proposed cuts in Long Island Bus service was a strong lesson in the blurred lines of accountability that frequently characterize mass transit issues in our region

Long Island Bus in nominally an MTA agency, like NYC Transit and Long Island Railroad. However, LI Bus does not receive a share of surplus revenues from MTA Bridge & Tunnel toll collections, or from various taxes dedicated to the MTA. Like Suffolk Transit or Westchester's Bee-Line, LI Bus relies for its budget on fare revenue, a county contribution and an annual appropriation of NY State transit operating assistance.

But because the MTA is responsible for administering and operating LI Bus, it convened the hearing on service reduction. MTA board members, including Chairman E. Virgil Conway, listened for almost seven hours to over 100 testimonies against the bus cuts. **Nassau County Executive Thomas Gulotta did not attend**, and no representative of county government sat on the panel that heard the testimony. However, the entire LI Bus service problem began when, in December, Gulotta unilaterally axed \$7 million from the county's contribution to LI Bus' operating budget.

MTA officials tried to make it clear at the hearing's outset that they had not sought the cuts, and that **the problem had originated in Nassau**. Some testimony, including that by Transport Workers Union Local 252 and the Tri-State Transportation Campaign, reinforced this message and called upon Gulotta to act to end the bus service crisis. Some, however, including a Republican Nassau County legislator, tried to further confuse the issue, referring to the "MTA's surplus."

At the hearing, hundreds of bus cut foes spilled from the auditorium into the lobby and the hospital's front steps. A large group of students mobilized by NYPIRG chanted against the cuts. Eight different television crews recorded the agitation. Channel 5 estimated at 10:15p.m. that **at least 1,000 opponents of the bus cuts had shown up at the hearing** or its environs.

At the podium, village mayors of Hempstead, Rockville Centre and Freeport, and a number of state legislators argued that many of their constituents would lose jobs if the cuts take effect. Disabled riders and their advocates shared stories about how LI Bus service allows them to remain self-sufficient.

The Tri-State Campaign commended the steps to fill the budget hole taken that day by State Senator Skelos and County Legislator Toback (see last issue), both of whom testified at the hearing's outset. Senator Skelos was especially forceful, stating that the County should be debating how to increase, not cut bus service, and that deep cuts would drive riders away from transit for years.

Transit and environmental groups blasted the Board's move: **"Compared to other agencies, NJ Transit has a stone age bus policy,"** said Jennifer Jaroski, the Tri-State Campaign's NJ Coordinator, "Where citizens want action for cleaner air, NJ Transit continues to spew both diesel pollution and litany of excuses for its lack of a clean fuel policy." Rutgers Environmental Law Clinic and NJ PIRG Citizen Lobby joined the Tri-State Campaign in denouncing the Board's decision as backwards and environmentally irresponsible.

Citizens Circle Wagons Against Bypass

Citizens, historic preservationists and environmental groups are stepping up their campaign to stop the Millstone Bypass, a new \$50 million highway that will cut across West Windsor near the Princeton Jct. train station. Road opponents are buying ads in local papers, raising funds, testifying at state and local hearings, and getting their message out in the press. An environmental assessment of the project is due to be released soon; the **citizens are pressing for a full impact statement** instead. Part of the highway would be adjacent to the Delaware and Raritan Canal, a major drinking water supply for central NJ towns.

NJ DOT is trying to gain an advantage in the dispute by **purchasing the road's right-of-way before the planning and environmental process is complete**, and alternatives are weighed. DOT revealed its plans to buy the ROW in its FY2001 capital program, which will be heard before the Legislature's appropriations committee April 11 and 12. The lands, which will cost \$11 million, run through the forest alongside the Millstone River and adjacent to the Canal's State Park.

DOT's studies show that the highway will increase single-occupant vehicle trips in the corridor. A 1996 congestion management study eliminated some of the cheapest and most effective strategies to control demand in the area, such as parking cash-out.

Recently, the Sierra Club (also representing the Tri-State Transportation Campaign) testified before the appropriations committee that the **ROW purchase would prejudice the decision** about an alignment or non-construction alternatives. This view has gained support in some policy circles at the FHWA headquarters, which is considering changes to its rule implementing the federal environmental impact statement law.

In the Works: More Ferries, Better Access

Since the return of a private ferry system to New York Harbor in 1986, **terminal access has been a constant problem** for what could be low-cost means of reducing road congestion. Currently, NY Waterways' cadre of free red, white, and blue shuttle buses that pick up and drop off commuters in Manhattan is the only service that ameliorates cramped parking lots. However, with some of a new set of planned ferry expansions and experiments, NY Waterways and others have gotten smart and **built in transit access components:**

- Two new Waterway routes are set to open this summer, one from Newport in Jersey City, the other from northern Hoboken to Manhattan's West 38th St. dock. A shuttle bus at both locations would make PATH and NJ Transit connections possible. By 2002, four new stops on the Hudson-Bergen light rail line will open along the Jersey City and Hoboken waterfronts, **providing direct NJ Transit train access to already existing East River ferry service.** Waterways also hopes to launch a service designed to carry Newark airport passengers between terminals in Elizabeth and Lower Manhattan by the Fall of 2001.
- The National Parks Service has recently given permission for the use of Federal land at the former Coast Guard Base at the Gateway National Recreation Area as temporary docking area for a Rockaways-Manhattan ferry. Gateway is soliciting proposals from operators and hopes to begin a pilot service by Memorial Day. The long term plan described by a Gateway superintendent **includes the provision of buses that would bring residents to the terminal.**

Other new services could chip away at bridge bottlenecks in the Hudson Valley and Middlesex County, NJ.

- Ferry service between Haverstraw (Rockland County) to Ossining (Westchester County) is set to begin this summer. A DOT pilot project overseen by the MTA and operated by NY Waterways, **the service is an attempt to provide modest relief to congestion on the Tappan-Zee Bridge.** In Ossining the service will be coordinated with the departure and arrival of Metro-North express trains to Manhattan. Construction of the 256-car parking lot in Haverstraw is on the Planning Board fast-track to begin work next month. The Board might also consider a jitney service to bring commuters to ferries in order to avoid future overflow or traffic back-ups.
- In addition to the new routes discussed above, NY Waterways is exploring the development of a high speed ferry between South Amboy and Manhattan. The service could **improve traffic flow at the choke point where Routes 35, 9 and the GSP cross the Raritan River.**

Calendar

April 8, 8:30am-3pm "Cities and Suburbs: Finding Common Ground on Suburban Sprawl and Urban Development", conference sponsored by Neighborhood Leadership Initiative, Princeton Holiday Inn, 4355 Rt 1 South at Ridge Rd, 973-267-5533 or CFNJ@bellatlantic.net

April 8, 9am-5pm NJ Environmental Federation 14th Annual Conference: "The Precautionary Principle: Stop the Poisoning Now", Rutgers University Labor Education Center, New Brunswick, \$. Registration. 732-280-8988

April 8-12 "Commuter Rail Conference" Panels & workshops on transit planning, design & operation American Public Transportation Assn. @ Hilton & Marriott Hotels in Melville and Huntington, NY 202-898-4076, info@apta.com or li-www.apta.com/ meetings/commuter/

April 10, 1pm NJTPA Board Meeting, 1 Newark Center, 17th Floor, Newark, 973-639-8400.

April 11, 12:30-2pm "Eliminating Congestion Bottlenecks" and "Promoting Off Peak Service and Delivery", Dept. of City Planning Brown Bag Lunch, 22 Reade St., Manhattan, 212-442-4630

April 11, 5:00pm Public information meeting on reconstruction of Suffolk Rte 16 (Portion Rd.). Sachem High School South, Lake Ronkonkoma.

April 12 South Jersey Regional Dinner of the NJ Alliance for Action, speaker Governor Christine Todd-Whitman, Four Points Hotel, Cherry Hill, NJ,

\$\$, registration, 732-225-1180

April 13,14, 9am-5pm American Museum of Natural History Symposium, "Nature in Fragments: The Legacy of Urban Sprawl", Central Park West at 79th St., \$, 769-5200 or <http://research.amnh.org/biodiversity/Sprawl/Symposium2k.html>

April 13, Noon Long Island Railroad Commuter Council monthly meeting. 347 Madison Ave., Manhattan, 10th floor. 212-878-7087.

April 18 WTS CT Valley Chapter Annual Luncheon, "Q-BridgeDesign and Surround Area Improvements", West Haven, CT, 860-633-0223

April 18, Noon Metro-North Commuter Council monthly meeting. 347 Madison Ave., Manhattan, 10th floor. 212-878-7087.

April 22 Manhattan Earth Day bike parade. Contact Transportation Alternatives, 212-629-8080.

April 25, 6pm "Strategies for Reducing Car Use in NYC" George Haikalis. Auto-Free NY, @ Transportation Alternatives, 115 West 30th St., Manhattan #1207. 212-475-3394.

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



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