

Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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NEWS

Public Unimpressed by "Community-Sensitive" Plan to Widen NY 347

At two "info-mercial" style public hearings on NY State DOT's new plan to widen Route 347 in Long Island's Smithtown and Brookhaven, citizens said the cost and disruption the plan would entail was not worth the few minutes of time NYS DOT says drivers would save when the work is done.

Citizens interviewed by the *Smithtown News* and the *Smithtown Messenger* were skeptical about land takings, construction impact on businesses, community impacts and environmental impacts from a wider road, school safety in Hauppauge and the fact that a bigger road will bring more traffic.

George Verderver said the DOT should "pave over all of Suffolk and get it done with already."

Several citizens pointed to the **seven minute or fewer time savings** DOT projects for the wider road, and said it was not worth the construction trouble and the **\$150-200 million cost**. A Campaign statement referred to the Surface Transportation Policy Project 1999 study that found motorists can lose more time in **road construction delays** than they will save in years of driving on the "improved" road (MTR #238). Thus, projects may meet the goal of accommodating more cars while doing little to improve commutes of those driving now.

The infomercial hearing format asks citizens to circulate among display boards and DOT planners to quietly provide comment on aspects of the plan. It dispenses with the usual practice of allowing public statements before agency officials and those attending the hearing, and seems designed to limit public debate and input.

Citizens interviewed at Tuesday's session were also disgruntled by the format. At Wednesday's meeting in Port Jefferson, Suffolk Legislator Vivian Fisher convened an impromptu meeting with civic leaders to set up a community organizing process regarding the project.

TSTC called on DOT to develop a non-widening scenario that would combine intersection improvements with non-paving strategies. The Affiliated Brookhaven Civic Organization pointed to the futility of widening highways to reduce congestion, and recommended transit, bike and pedestrian improvements.

A DOT plan to make the whole length of Route 347 a limited-access expressway was rejected by public and elected officials in 1996.

The Campaign's statement on Route 347, and a link to NYS DOT's 347 web-site, are available at www.tstc.org

NJ Trust Fund Reauthorization: Senate Sticks With Blank Check Approach

— But Democrats Back Reform Measures —

A bill to renew the Transportation Trust Fund in New Jersey was released from the Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee unanimously yesterday, but its accompanying resolution to constitutionally dedicate additional monies from the sales tax and the remaining 1.5 cents of the 10.5 cent gas tax (which now go into the State's general fund), ran into opposition as the three Democrats on the committee abstained.

Democrats on the committee had attempted to insert the Tri-State Transportation Campaign's **Trust Fund reform language** into the bill, but lost in a 4-3 vote, with one abstention.

If party affiliation controls the Senate floor vote on the Trust Fund bill, scheduled for Thursday, May 18, the measure will fail, because Republicans do not hold the **three-fifths supermajority** required to amend the state constitution, which dedicating general fund monies to the Trust Fund would require.

The Tri-State Transportation Campaign has waged a battle to insert wording in Senate President Donald DiFrancesco's bill, S.16, that would guide DOT's spending towards particular goals, including ambitious bridge and road repair targets, building the rail freight projects outlined in the DOT Rail Freight Master Plan, building the 200 lane-miles of bike-ways Governor Whitman promised in her 1998 inaugural speech and reducing pedestrian fatalities by one-third in five years.

Democrats on the Senate Transportation Committee also unsuccessfully attempted to insert the Campaign's language in the bill last week.

Senator Bernard Kenny, a Hudson County Democrat, sponsored the amendment to insert the Campaign's language in the bill, along with an anti-sprawl measure (prohibiting DOT from building new highways in State Plan Areas 4 (rural farmlands) and 5 (environmentally sensitive areas). That amendment failed 4-3, with one abstention. Opposition to the reform amendments outside the Legislature seems to be centered in the **"sprawl lobby."** The NJ Business and Industry Association testified yesterday as "vehemently opposed" to the amendment. Reportedly, the NJ Chamber of Commerce and National Association of Office and Industrial Parks also oppose the measure. Road industry and labor groups were out in force at the hearing, but took no position on the Campaign's amendment.

New Jersey DOT testimony yesterday underscored the need for **more accountability in transportation planning** and spending.

In testimony, NJ Transportation Commissioner James Weinstein said DOT projects would meet state planning guidelines. But he later said the TSTC provision to prohibit highway construction in State Plan areas 4 and 5 would constrain the Department's ability to solve transportation problems.

In contrast, Hopewell Township mayor Marylou Ferrara testified that the measure is "a common-sense provision that allows the state to put its money where its mouth regarding the State Plan. I can't figure who would oppose that, except those in favor of more sprawl."

A Campaign opinion piece in yesterday's *Asbury Park Press* argued that, as it stands now, "the Senate Trust Fund bill is just **another big blank check** made out to the State DOT." The Campaign urged the

Vanderhoef Raises Big T-Z II Questions

Rockland County Executive C. Scott Vanderhoef announced at the I-287 Task Force public meeting in Suffern last Tuesday that he supported calls for an **independent review** of the need for a replacement for the Tappan Zee Bridge. The County Executive also responded to concerns that the proposed mass transit component of the Tappan Zee II plan is part of a bait-and-switch strategy to win support for bridge replacement by calling for a **guarantee that any new bridge would include transit**. Vanderhoef's positions were spelled out in a letter to NY State Thruway director John Platt, which was read into the meeting's record. Vanderhoef also said east-west transit proposals should not preclude action to re-institute passenger service on the West Shore line.

South Jersey Light Rail's Funding Lesson

Construction began last week on a light rail line that will parallel the Delaware River between Trenton and Camden, utilizing Conrail tracks for most of its 34-mile route. Observers speculate the **state is footing the bill** for the entire \$603 million project for two reasons. The 4,150 person projected daily ridership was unlikely to be enough to pass federal cost-efficiency standards (capital and operations cost per ridership mile). Also, NJTransit is vying for TEA-21 'New Starts' money for high-ridership projects like the second and third sections of the \$1.1 billion Hudson-Bergen light rail, expected when finished to draw 48,000 passengers per day.

New Jersey's decision provides an example of the problems of funding transit in low-density areas. For example, in New York, while high-rider projects like the 2nd Avenue Subway and LIRR East Side Access project remain in need, it will probably be very difficult to get federal funding for the proposed **\$3 billion commuter rail system** connecting Orange, Rockland and Westchester counties across a new Tappan Zee bridge.

Legislature to overcome its timidity in the face of DOT's efforts to maintain its control over decisions about our transportation future.

NYC Traffic Calming News



The May-June *Transportation Alternatives* magazine is packed with important updates and recommendations on efforts to make New York City more pedestrian- and bicycle-friendly. Among the notable news items:

- The NYC Dept. of Transportation has yet to act on new powers given it by **state traffic calming legislation**. The city may now design traffic calming installations with very low design speeds, but has not developed any momentum on this score. T.A.'s efforts to talk to city DOT and City Hall about the problem so far gone unanswered.
- A recent study finds traffic signals on **super-wide Queens Boulevard** give pedestrians only 33 seconds to cross, and encourage speeding by drivers. Result: one of NYC's most deadly streets for pedestrians.
- NYC DOT is doing its best to ensure that **traffic calming plans for Downtown Brooklyn** are as watered-down as possible. Recent statements by DOT's Brooklyn chief Kathy Keegan indicate the agency's goal is for "traffic calming" plans to make as little impact on drivers as possible.
- NYC DOT's **bike rack installation program** has emerged from hibernation. Hundreds of new racks, essential to convenient bike travel in the city, are popping up around the five boroughs.
- A March letter from Transportation Alternatives, the Tri-State Campaign and other groups decried the NYPD's installation of more **midtown Manhattan pedestrian barricades**. The barriers were erected without warning, and continue the Giuliani Administration's worthless effort to squeeze out minute traffic speed increase at the expense of midtown's vast pedestrian majority.
- Despite new efforts to instill "within-the-law" attitudes at the NYPD, transit cops stationed in Harlem have grabbed a chunk of the **St. Nicholas Ave. bike lane** as their own private parking lot for the second year in a row, and recently threatened to arrest cyclists who went to the station to point out the illegality of the move.

NYC Bike Week May 15-21 "Exercise Your Right to Bike"

May 15, 12-12:30pm Vigil to Memorialize the 35 Cyclists Killed in 1999, NYC City Hall

May 19 Corporate Challenge Day, register your office to compete for the most bike commuters

Other events include free bike commuter breakfasts in every borough, group rides, etc. See www.transalt.org or call 212-629-8080 for full schedule.

S.I. Bus Depot in the Works

Transit provisions for Staten Island in the MTA five-year capital plan include funding for construction of a long-awaited **third bus depot** and a \$6.6 million earmark for 6-10 new Park-and-Ride facilities. The latter would be best utilized if created in tandem with a quick transit ride into the City, as would be possible on a **bus-only lane** on the **SI and Gowanus Expressways**.

The depot will house up to 250 diesel express buses with the ability to adapt to CNG fueling in the future. Islanders have urged construction of more depots for the growing S.I. express bus fleet. Staten Island express bus ridership — which accounts for 71% of the city's total — grew almost 13% in 1999.

Although the new depot is likely to be in the Community Board 3 area, the express buses to be housed there will not serve South Shore residents. The few express bus routes that through communities south of Huguenot Avenue are now operated by private companies.

This may change if a bill (A10168) sponsored by Assemblywoman Elizabeth Connelly, requiring the MTA to **begin at least 4 new express bus routes** in the South Shore by Sept. 30, passes the Assembly. The *Advance* reported last week that its companion bill (S7130) championed by Senator John Marchi was approved by the State Senate.

Rail Tunnel Worth a Million Trucks

Representatives of the NYC Economic Development Corporation presented preliminary findings of the group's Cross Harbor Freight Movement Major Investment Study to Staten Island's Community Board 1 earlier this month. Alice Cheng, Director of Intermodal Planning, and Andrew Genn, Director of Strategic Port Planning, discussed two possible locations of a **cross-harbor rail freight tunnel**.

One proposal runs the tunnel from the 65th St. freight yard in Brooklyn to Staten Island's North Shore. Trains would travel via the North Shore railroad line to Howland Hook and NJ via the Arthur Kill lift bridge. The second option considered would link Brooklyn directly to NJ's Greenville Railyard. The Brooklyn-New Jersey proposal is slightly less expensive, but the bi-state effort would be more politically complex.

EDC estimates either option would remove more than a million trucks per year from Staten Island highways.



The Tri-State Transportation Campaign Web Site

www.tstc.org

Army Corps Raps Second Jersey Road Project

Last week, the South Jersey Transportation Authority agreed to pay a land conservation group \$225,000 to avoid facing an administrative trial for **numerous violations of federal environmental permits** during highway construction associated with the **Atlantic City tunnel** project. The \$330 million dollar project, funded jointly by New Jersey, Mirage Resorts, and the authority is intended to link the Atlantic City Expressway with the Marina district where a billion-dollar casino development is planned. The Army Corps of Engineers began proceedings in January when it found dredged and fill material had been dumped in off-limits water and wetlands areas along the extended expressway route.

The Army Corps brought a strikingly similar case against the NJ DOT last month that resulted in a \$25,000 fine and forced suspension of the agency's work on **Route 29** in Trenton (*MTR #264*). DOT's contractor was found guilty of dumping dredged material into the Delaware River and allowing further sediment to drop in it, disrupting the upstream migration of shad and threatening an endangered species of sturgeon.

Activists and Federal agencies would not have to continually watch-dog these damaging projects if language in the Trust Fund reauthorization bill prohibited highway expansion through land ostensibly protected by the State Development and Redevelopment Plan.

Bulldozers Target Another City Highway

On April 26th, Councilman Bill Saundercook, chair of the **Toronto** City Works Committee, knocked down a piece of the eastern segment of the **Gardiner Expressway** to signal the beginning of the demolition of this eastern stub of the elevated roadway. The expressway had been started in 1964, and was intended to be a bypass around the south-eastern edge of the city. It was never finished. In 1996, the Metro Council and City of Toronto Council endorsed dismantling the 1.4km highway. One year later the project had received the environmental approvals necessary and by 1999 the project design had been completed.

The highway stub will be replaced with a new lake-front boulevard, with enhanced landscaping, cycling and pedestrian routes, green space and public art.

But according to the *Toronto Star*, this is just the beginning. Toronto is planning on leveling the **entire expressway**, not just the eastern stub. Unlike similar projects proposed for Milwaukee, Akron and the Bronx where the highways in question see fewer than 40,000 vehicles/day each, this road handles 200,000 cars daily.

Consultants for the project found that the congestion problems on the expressway resulted from its **use for local trips**. Over 80% of the people using the Gardiner got off downtown, creating backups at on- and off-ramps. So they are redesigning the streets to handle the traffic without the elevated expressway. The removal project will be completed for the 2008 Olympics.

