

Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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NEWS

LI 20-Yr Hway Widening Plan Meetings Set

The New York State DOT will convene citizens and technical advisory committee meetings Thursday, June 8 and Tuesday, June 13, respectively, for its Long Island Transportation Plan (LITP) 2000 study.

The study is supposed to map a 20-year plan for transportation on Long Island. But, like most metro area planning efforts, it has been hampered by weak collaboration between transit and highway agencies. As a NY State DOT-run initiative, the LITP work has predictably produced an **overwhelming emphasis on highway expansion**. This was apparent in an LITP television presentation a year ago (MTR #222), and has been confirmed by a recent DOT update.

Of four main policy scenarios DOT identifies in its update, the "transit" option consists mainly of **express buses in new HOV-2 lanes**, while roadway pricing is also confined to HOV lanes that would be added to highways like the Northern State Parkway.

The Tri-State Campaign has asked DOT leadership to revisit the study. Public reaction last week against DOT's Route 347 widening scheme suggests an Island-wide road expansion effort will be quite unpopular.

NYPD to be Grilled on Traffic Deaths?

The NYC Council transportation committee has scheduled a hearing on last year's alarming rise in pedestrian and cyclist deaths (City Hall, 1 p.m., Monday, May 22). The advocacy group **Right of Way** will present a report documenting that most fatal bicycle crashes in New York City are caused by aggressive or careless motorists, refuting the NYPD's often-repeated claim that three-quarters of cyclist fatalities are the cyclist's fault.

Hearing on Route 92 EIS: June 8

On May 9th, the Army Corps of Engineers announced the date of the "public scoping" hearing for the new Environmental Impact Statement for Route 92. The hearing will be held at the Princeton Holiday Inn on Route 1, commencing at 2pm (see calendar). In early February, the Corps released its decision to require a full EIS for the controversial proposed 6.7-mile **new limited access toll highway** that would connect the NJ Turnpike to Route 1 by sending traffic through an undeveloped part of Middlesex County (MTR #253).

The Campaign received the public notice on May 15th. As of this writing, many municipalities concerned about the impact of added traffic, especially more trucks, in their communities seem not as yet to have been notified.

Nassau Recovery Shouldn't Sacrifice Long Island Bus

Although Governor Pataki has pledged significant state support to keep Nassau County from going bust, the aid will require county budget cuts. It's clear the county will face tough fiscal times during the next few years.

The Governor also helped plug holes that County Executive Thomas Gulotta opened up in the Long Island Bus budget earlier this year, though it's unclear whether additional cuts discussed last month by Gulotta still threaten Long Island Bus service.

In any event, the fiscal plan the state and county work out should ensure that bus service in Nassau County is able to **maintain current levels of service**, and indeed add service on routes that are over-crowded now.

If LI Bus is forced to make cuts, many riders forced to find other means of travel will not come back even after the County gets back on its feet.

Long Island Bus has seen **ridership increase over 15%** in the past three years, underscoring the importance of mass transit in today's robust economy. Long Island Bus' "no more diesels" bus purchase policy also makes it a national environmental leader. Long Island Bus is an important asset Nassau County that the state should seek to preserve and enhance.

Hudson-Bergen Light Rail Reality Check?

Last Wednesday, the *Star-Ledger* reported on its front page that ridership on the new Hudson-Bergen light rail line has been **far lower than anticipated**. Prior to its opening on April 15th, NJTransit planners and officials hoped for an early count of between 7,000-9,000 passengers per day, but the average number traveling between stops in Jersey City and Bayonne during the line's third week of operation sat at 3,700.

Transit officials and experts interviewed for the article unanimously proclaimed it far **too early to pass judgment** on the success of the line, and cited numerous reasons for the shortfall.

Strong factors discouraging greater use are that the originally conceived initial operating segment is still under construction, and the mass transit dead-end at the line's Bayonne terminus. Observers expect that once the line is extended to provide access to major destinations and connections like the Newport



shopping mall (Spring 2001) and **Hoboken Terminal** (2002), ridership will reach and likely exceed projected levels (see table). At present, the only convenient light rail-PATH connection leads to the World Trade Center, not to the much larger **Midtown** business district.

While Exchange Place is rapidly becoming a major business and transit center, the *Star-Ledger* recently described Bayonne as an “economically stagnant, isolated peninsula.” Staten Islanders who might use the Bayonne terminus as a transfer point to Jersey City or Manhattan are now derailed by the lack of connecting express bus service and the absence of a completed parking lot at the 34th St. terminal.

Another factor not discussed in news reports is the light rail’s fare policy. A **free or discounted transfer to PATH trains** would surely draw large numbers of

new riders and should have been part of the original fare plan unveiled in March (*MTR #260*). Also, while NJTransit does offer free transfers to connecting NJT buses for light rail monthly pass holders, the incentive to hop on the light rail could be made stronger by promoting **single-ride free transfers**, like the highly successful MTA MetroCard arrangement.

In the long term, completion of current and planned development should also add thousands of daily riders to the area. Six new office towers are sited for construction in Jersey City alone over the next five years. Retail and residential complexes will be built near the Marin Boulevard and Essex St. Station, with the Jersey City Medical Center also to be located with access to the light rail. Due to the new transit line, Bayonne is also situated to become a popular residential alternative to the increasingly expensive communities to its north.

Opportunity for South Bronx Rail Renaissance

Last week, Metro-North Railroad announced it will run additional trains on two lines starting July 9th, significantly expanding rail service in the Bronx. Four new trains will be added on the Harlem Line, one on the Hudson line and one on the New Haven Line. With the addition, 25 trains per weekday will stop at the **Melrose and Tremont stations**, compared to 11 now. 20 trains will stop on the weekends at both stations where there **presently is no weekend service**.

The news was welcomed by Bronx community activists and transit advocates.

Metro-North anticipates at least a 260,000 spike in ridership over all the three lines due to recently completed capital projects: the Park Avenue Viaduct, which permits more trains to enter and leave Grand Central Terminal, the purchase of 50 new coaches, and the extension of the Harlem line to Wassaic in Dutchess County. The agency expects that the new services will turn an operating profit (relative to car-mile and crew costs, not capital investment) of roughly \$.5 million.

Still, a big question is whether planned **improvements to the Melrose and Tremont** stations will be completed quickly enough to draw customers to the upgraded service. According to planning documents, \$2 million dollars allocated for this work won’t be spent until 2001. Melrose Station has had minor improvements in the past year – new lights, a coat of paint. However, the stairways must be fixed, shelter provided and station signs installed. Similarly, East Tremont Station needs stair and platform repairs and new signage on Tremont Avenue. South Bronx civic groups like Nos Quedamos have pushed for Melrose station renovation for years. The station was cited in a recent report by NYC Public Advocate Mark Green as one of the city’s worst commuter rail stops (*MTR #257*).

If the new service is to be a success, riders must be able to find the stations and feel safe waiting in them. Metro-North can’t accurately judge the stations’ use until their physical conditions are **attractive enough to draw riders**.

New Light Rail Systems: Ridership

LIGHT RAIL SYSTEM	BEGAN REVENUE SERVICE	TRACK MILEAGE	AVG. DAILY RIDERS (first month)	AVG. DAILY RIDERS (for NJ, projected)	RIDERS/ TRACK-MILE (first month)
Hudson-Bergen (JC - Bayonne)	April 2000	7.5	3,700 (3rd week)	18,400 (2001)	493 (3rd week)
Hudson-Bergen	Dec. 2005	20.5	100,000	4,878
DART (Dallas)	June 1996	20	18,000	38,000	900
MetroLink (St Louis)	July 1993	17	30,000	39,980	1,765

CT Transit Treads Water

At a Metro-North/Shore Line East Commuter Council meeting at the Westport train station last Wednesday, ConnDOT public transportation bureau chief Harry Harris described how the agency will use the \$35 million set aside for transit from last year’s \$240 million state budget surplus. ConnDOT plans to purchase 4 new Genesis dual/mode diesel/electric locomotives, plus up to ten new rail coaches for use on both branch and the main New Haven line. House Speaker Moira Lyons (Stamford) won the **money for transit improvements** in order to aid ConnDOT in achieving its legislated mandate to **reduce traffic by 5%** in the southwestern part of the I-95 corridor.

“It won’t allow us to expand service or change the schedule,” Senate Majority leader George Jepson, who also supported the grant, recently told the *Stamford Advocate*. But Harris said the purchases should help reduce the crowding caused by **constant maintenance and repairs** being done on the 244 30-year old M2 cars which make up 81% of ConnDOT’s fleet. On any given day, **50-60 cars are out of service**. In comparison, 36% of NJ Transit’s operating fleet is over 25 years old, and all of these have been rebuilt in the last 15 years. Rebuilding CT’s M2 fleet will begin this summer, a seven-year process that is expected to add at least ten

years to their functional life.

Mr. Harris reported that ConnDOT is “not in a position to replace” the aging fleet because of infrastructure project demands on the capital budget. But clearly, the **Rowland Administration’s lack of enthusiasm for public transit** and incoherent transportation policies has much to do with the agency’s current lack of funds. More attractive trains and operating budget support for additional service and fare incentives could underpin a realistic effort to meet the 5% traffic reduction mandate. Instead, Connecticut government chose to cut gas taxes, which will reduce investment in transit and give drivers additional incentive to stay behind the wheel

A Shuttle for Every Station? NJ Transit Buys Jitneys, but Operating Costs a Barrier



Last Monday, NJ Transit announced the list of communities that will receive **20 commuter shuttle buses** next Spring under the agency’s “Community Shuttle Program” (see box). The 20-person, \$70,000 jitney buses will ease congestion around rail stations and reduce parking overflow by providing frequent curb-to-station service to resident commuters. In off-hours, municipalities intend to use the new buses to serve senior citizens or as added intra-city mass transit.

The program is paid for from a \$3.5 million ear-mark secured by **Representative William Pascrell** of Paterson in 1998. Congressman Pascrell was motivated by the success of the Maplewood pilot jitney service, spear-headed by the Campaign in 1996, now serving 12% of the town’s rail passengers every weekday morning. 45% Maplewood jitney riders previously drove to the station.

Thirty-three towns and counties applied for the shuttle money, but many more were daunted by the roughly **\$25,000 a year cost of operating the service** that, under the current program, each municipality must pay in full. But a little-noticed item in the draft 2001-2003 North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority Transportation Improvement Program may help. NJTransit has set aside \$1 million of federal air pollution reduction money to fund “operating expense for the community shuttle program.” NJT should publicize the existence of this money during the second round of grants later this year, so that municipalities unable to cover the full operating costs of a jitney program can still participate.

Towns that will receive new NJ Transit-purchased station shuttle buses	
Clifton	North Plainfield
Edison	Old Bridge
Glen Ridge	Orange
Hackensack (2)	Rahway
Maplewood	Redbank
Marlboro	Rutherford
Metuchen	Secaucus
New Brunswick	South Orange (2)

EPA To Diesel Industry: Clean Up Your Act

On Thursday, the US EPA released the agency’s suggested stringent pollution control rules for **diesel trucks and buses**. The requirements would force a 95% reduction in ozone-inducing nitrogen oxide emissions phased in over four years beginning in 2006, a 90% reduction in particulate emissions by 2007, and a 97% reduction in the sulfur levels in diesel fuel from 500 parts per million to 15 ppm. Sulfur clogs emission filters on diesel buses and trucks, reducing their efficiency. Its removal makes it possible for new trucks and buses to be required to use the pollution control devices long mandated for cars.

To complaints by the diesel industry that the new fuel standards will prove impossible to meet, Carol Browner, director of the EPA replied “We don’t see any reason why they shouldn’t be able to deliver clean diesel fuel.” Rich Kassel of the Natural Resources Defense Council said that environmentalists are preparing to meet an expected industry backlash, explaining, “It has become clear to us that some oil companies would rather spend their money on lobbyists than on cleaning up their fuel.”

The Clinton administration will hold **hearings in June** on the proposed regulations, one of them in NYC, followed by a 45-day public comment period. NRDC and other environmental groups have vowed to win an accelerated phase-in of the nitrogen oxide reduction, as well as to increase incentives for **transit fleets** to switch to non-diesel, cleaner fuel alternatives like CNG.

- Feds Say Diesel Particles Likely Carcinogen -

On Monday, the U.S. Department of Health’s National Toxicology Program headquartered at the National Institute of Health released the 9th edition of its *Report on Carcinogens*. In it, diesel exhaust particulates are listed for the first time as **“reasonably anticipated to be [a] human carcinogen”** from evidence in humans and laboratory animals. The *Report*, based on three years of exhaustive study and comment, is used as a primary reference by the U.S. Congress, Federal and State agencies, as well as private businesses, labor unions, and the general public.

The Department of Health joins the WHO and the California Air Resource Board, and the EPA who have already sounded the alarm that exposure to components of diesel exhaust increase cancer risks.

Tragedy Spotlights NJ Truck Ban Failings

An over-size tractor-trailer attempting to keep up with a convoy of garbage haulers crashed into a video store along Route 179 in Lambertville (Route 29) on May 12th, killing a woman working behind the counter. The death underlined the safety concerns that motivated Governor Whitman’s July 1999 ban on 102-inch trucks on non-National Highway Network roads, and since then has directed public attention to the **ban’s complete lack of enforcement**.

Although a law was passed in mid-January that requires drivers of 102” wide trucks found traveling on

