

Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

Number 277

July 17, 2000

NEWS

NJ Lawmakers Finish Work on Transportation Trust Fund Bill

Big Win for Transportation Reform

Yesterday's legislative approval of NJ Transportation Trust Fund bills capped four years of campaigning for an effective **"fix-it-first" roadway investment policy**, led by the Tri-State Transportation Campaign. This year's legislative success was based on a strong outreach effort to lawmakers and effective **marshalling of editorial opinion** around the state in favor of policies promoting road repair and greater transportation choice. Six daily newspapers, including the Bergen *Record*, the Philadelphia *Inquirer* and the Trenton *Times* endorsed the Campaign's proposed Trust Fund amendments, or their general approach to transportation spending.

The effort received strong support in Trenton from the New Jersey Environmental Lobby, NJPIRG Citizen Lobby, the NJ Sierra Club and the NJ Environmental Federation. Around the state, staff and members from Association of NJ Environmental Commissions, American Littoral Society, Bike NJ, Environmental Defense, Great Swamp Watershed Assn., the League of American Bicyclists and Transport Workers Union Local 225 all pitched in. The NJ Conservation Foundation used its regular column in smaller newspapers to promote the reform agenda.



Tri-State Transportation Campaign executive director Janine Bauer inspects crumbling Route 1&9 viaduct during 1996 "fix-it-first" press conference

Legislature Sends Bill to Whitman

The New Jersey State Senate and State Assembly each passed a \$3.6 billion four-year transportation capital spending measure that contains **new policy guidelines** designed to channel roadway spending into needed maintenance work, requires legislative approval for new alignment highways and requires NJDOT to develop a 1,000-mile bikeway network (see *MTR* #'s 275, 276)

"In enacting this bill, New Jersey joins a handful of other states taking clear action to **fix roads and bridges**, set barriers against more sprawl development and **clear the air and the roads** through more effective transportation," Tri-State Campaign executive director Janine Bauer told the *Star-Ledger*.

The measure is now with Governor Whitman, who is expected to sign it. A revenue provision in the bill will be put **before voters in November**, because it constitutionally dedicates tax revenues now used for other purposes to the Transportation Trust Fund.

Backing for Gowanus Tunnel Stronger Than Ever

NYC City Council Members from Brooklyn convened a news conference Tuesday to announce \$75,000 in funding for the Regional Plan Association to continue studying the possibilities of burying the Gowanus Expressway in a tunnel. Council members Ken Fisher and Angel Rodriguez were joined by RPA and west Brooklyn community leaders at a Sunset Park news conference to reiterate their call for the State DOT to tunnel the highway instead of rebuilding it in place.

"Simply rebuilding the highway in place would continue a great urban mistake," Fisher told the *Staten Island Advance*. "This is going to be **New York City's biggest land use decision** in years," RPA's Al Appleton said. "We can have just another road or a road that's urban-friendly."

The **NY State DOT** says it's examining a tunnel option in its environmental impact statement for the Gowanus, but it has **generally poured cold water** on the idea in public statements, citing cost and feasibility.

Fisher said if the state can afford a \$4 billion plan for a **Tappan Zee Bridge replacement** and low ridership Tappan Zee commuter rail line, it should be willing to pay for the benefits a Gowanus tunnel would confer on Brooklyn. He said the Gowanus carries twice the daily traffic of the Tappan Zee.

The State DOT's plan to rebuild the Gowanus in place — while diverting **thousands of cars each day** onto

South Bronx: Trains Start Stopping

On July 9, Metro-North schedule changes, announced in May (*MTR #270*) went into effect. For the South Bronx' Melrose and East Tremont stations, this meant **doubling weekday service** and the **first weekend service in recent memory**. 25 trains will stop at the stations on weekdays and 20 on weekends. This is only a third of service provided to stops like the Botanic Gardens and Scarsdale. But it is sufficient for people to commute to jobs in Westchester or the Bronx.

At a June press conference, the Bronx Borough President's Office and community and transportation groups applauded the service increase, but warned Metro-North **not to count on new passengers** until Melrose and East Tremont stations had been upgraded. Metro-North's 2001 capital budget includes \$2.1 million for renovations at the stations.

Community activists want Metro North to install signs pointing to the stations soon, not as part of the renovation. Melrose Station's entrance is on 162nd Street, one block off the neighborhood's main street — 161st — along which are the Court Houses, Yankee Stadium and the Civic Center. Long-time residents have been surprised to learn there is a station on 162nd Street, because there are no signs pointing to it.

Newark Airport: Back to Buses



The severe problems experienced by the Newark Airport monorail (design flaws have forced it partially out of service now, and it will be closed entirely for repairs from Labor Day until the end of the year) appear to be bringing home complaints made over the years by transit advocates concerned about the **Port Authority's penchant for unique, exotic rail systems**, rather than off-the-shelf rapid transit or light rail gear.

It's hard to imagine the F-train or the #6 conking out for six months.

But both the Newark monorail, built in 1996, and the JFK AirTrain, now in construction, are unlike other rail facilities in the region, have few sister systems anywhere and thus have short track records. Top officials may want to use another agency to pick technology for future rail projects, like a LaGuardia train to the plane.

The notion of **extending the PATH train** to Newark Airport, which seemed redundant when Governor Whitman broached it anew earlier this summer, is looking better all the time.

The PA is telling passengers to add 30 minutes to travel times at Newark Airport, which is already no walk in the park for either ground access or air travel. 30,000 passengers per day used the airport monorail before service was curtailed last week. An extension is supposed to link airport terminals to a new Northeast Corridor train station in 2001.

local streets — has been a lightning rod since the early 1990s. When the DOT **tried to begin the project without any environmental review**, Brooklyn elected officials and community groups handed DOT its own head. DOT has been back at the drawing board now for a number of years, but is still in the midst of a lawsuit over the project's planning process.

GSP Confirms Non-stop Toll Potential

NJ highway officials have finished the report that legislators asked them to undertake last year on the potential for installing **high-speed toll collection** technology along the Garden State Parkway.

According to the *Star-Ledger*, the study finds that such a system **would work well** along the 173-mile Parkway, which features **toll plazas sitting across the road's main through lanes**. These toll facilities create big back-ups. Highways featuring non-stop toll collection generally split electronic toll payers and cash payers into separate lanes some distance before the toll plaza.

Still, the report found that reengineering the Parkways entire toll system could cost up to **\$100 million**. Road authorities were cautious, saying they would prefer to install the standard E-ZPass now underway before considering something more high-tech. NJ Turnpike Authority director Edward Gross told the *Ledger* that retro-fitting old toll booths with E-ZPass would make such a dramatic difference in traffic flow that spending big money on non-stop tolling will be unnecessary.

But State Assembly Transportation Committee Chair **Alex DeCroce said the state should proceed now** with the best available technology. Last year, DeCroce introduced legislation to require the Parkway to set up non-stop toll collection at toll plazas where E-ZPass market share exceeds two-thirds. E-ZPass use at some Parkway facilities is now close to 50% (see *MTR #276*). The legislation spurred the Parkway to begin its study. The bill has support in the Assembly but needs more attention in the NJ Senate.

A citizens group seeking complete removal of Parkway tolls, **Citizens Against Tolls**, increased its activity this week, saying it intended to deliver large petitions to Governor Whitman. The group apparently is concerned primarily with traffic flow, not with the state raising highway revenue from motorists, because it proposed **hiking the state gas tax** to make up for revenue lost along the Parkway. In that case, it should simply back the drive to establish non-stop tolling. A member of the NJ chapter of the National Motorists Association cited in the *Ledger* expressed support for non-stop tolls.

Jersey City Mayor and gubernatorial aspirant Bret Schundler supported Citizens Against Toll's call for toll elimination, but said he didn't support raising the state gas tax. Schundler earned Duncie of the Week honors by stating to the *Record* that paying for highway upkeep is **"a discussion we can have another day,"** just as the Legislature completed work on a four-year authorization of the NJ Transportation Trust Fund.

As NJ Toughens Stance, Truckers' Lawsuit Heads for Showdown



Earlier this year, the American Trucking Association filed a challenge in federal court to the truck route plans NJ Dept. of Transportation adopted in 1999, first on an emergency basis in July, then formally last fall.

The truckers' trade group claims that **NJ rules banning some trucks from certain routes** is discriminatory because they treat truck trips starting and ending outside of New Jersey differently than trips that originate or have a destination in-state. After little movement in the case for months, state troopers began enforcing the ban this summer, recently stopping more than 2,000 trucks and issuing summonses to hundreds.

Now, the ATA has moved for partial judgment; briefs will be filed in August and **the case probably decided, at least in part, in September**. The N.J. Motor Truck Association refused to join its national counterpart in suing the state, since truckers having either an origin or destination in New Jersey are provided more routes to choose from.

Under NJ's current route plan, interstate truck trips must stay on the "national network" of routes, which includes all of the interstate highways, the Turnpike, the Atlantic City Expressway, and other connecting routes.

While New Jersey clearly has authority to keep trucks off local roads, the ATA claims it does so in a discriminatory fashion. The League of Municipalities has already intervened in the case **urging the court to uphold the ban**, pointing to the many fatalities, accidents, other safety problems, noise, pollution and quality of life impacts these interstate trucks have had on communities, especially along Routes, 29, 31, 518, 206 and similar narrow or two-lane roads. Recently, a woman was killed in her Hopewell Valley video store by a trash truck from Massachusetts. The truck careened through a red light and lost control while trying to keep up with the garbage convoy it belonged to.

While local truck drivers are much more likely to know the territory, the Tri-State Transportation Campaign urged a broader truck route plan that would have regulated trucks up to 96-inches wide, and kept many New Jersey trucks on wider, higher-speed more appropriate routes, as well. **The Campaign expects to join the case soon**, and will argue that the ban is lawful as written, and that **a broader ban** would be even wiser.

NJ DOT had been planning to re-adopt the status quo truck routes, but outraged towns, counties and others impacted by the dangerous rigs joined cause with the Campaign to urge a re-examination of the route rules. The Campaign and some truck coalition members tried unsuccessfully to get the Legislature to regulate 96-inch wide trucks as part of the route plan in the Transportation Trust Fund renewal legislation. Instead, the Legislature required a "report."

U.S. Senate Rejects Election Season Gas Tax Suspension

Senators Moynihan and Lautenberg spoke up on the Senate floor during yesterday's Senate consideration of an amendment to suspend the federal gas tax until after the November elections. Lautenberg articulated the position of many Senators that the move would put revenue for **important transportation infrastructure projects** at risk. He suggested that Middle Eastern countries owe the U.S. low oil prices in return for military protection, citing the 1991 Gulf War.

Senator Moynihan said the measure "represents a futile attempt to **repeal the laws of supply and demand**," noting that suddenly lower fuel prices would boost demand, driving prices back up in a tight supply environment. Thus, the government would deprive itself of transportation revenue, but motorists would see little, if any, sustained price change. Moynihan also said that, adjusted for inflation, **Americans are paying less for gas** now than in the 1980s.

The amendment, sponsored by Republican Senators from Michigan, Illinois, Texas and Minnesota, contained a provision to channel federal "surplus" funds into the Highway Trust Fund, but most Senators didn't buy it. Senators Lautenberg, Moynihan, Schumer, Torricelli and Lieberman voted against the measure. Senator Dodd was absent from the vote, but announced his opposition to gas tax suspension in a statement.

Among the region's Senate challengers, NY's Rick Lazio has shown support for federal gas tax reduction.

Hillary Against Gas Tax Cut, No Position on T-Z II

Lazio's opponent, Hillary Clinton, told the *Journal-News* in a recent interview that she didn't know what the best solution for Tappan Zee corridor congestion relief would be, but that as Senator, she would abide by the local decision and help win federal funding for it. She reiterated her opposition to federal gas tax repeal or reduction (see *MTR #276*).

Tappan Zee Transit Undergoes Adjustment

Rockland County and NY State DOT officials are re-vamping the schedules and routes of **Tappan Zee Express** bus routes, according to the *Journal-News*. All buses except a route directly serving the Metro-North station in Tarrytown are experiencing **very low ridership**. The new plan will develop a park-and-ride lot at the Palisades Center mall into a bus route hub. Plans for a bus-priority lane at the Tappan Zee toll booths may also be in the works.

Despite Huge Investment, New England Rail Service Limp Along

— Most NYC-Boston Trains Slower than Driving —

After spending \$680 million to electrify its tracks between New Haven and Boston, Amtrak has yet to capitalize on the investment (*MTR #255*). The railroad is still running only two electric Acela Regional trains

per day (the highly-touted 3-hour express trains have yet to make their debut). Thus, most rail passengers on the line continue to undergo the frustrating, time-consuming **switch between diesel and electric locomotives** in New Haven, and suffer a **dreadful 5-hour-plus** (when on schedule) run between Boston and New York.

Amtrak's ideal plan is to run seven regional 4-hour and ten 3-hour express daily round trips between link Boston and New York City. That plan was originally going to get started last September, but is severely delayed due to problems obtaining new train equipment.

According to an Amtrak spokesperson, the bare bones regional (4-hour) schedule on the NorthEast Corridor is due to **long delays** receiving the **new electric locomotives** from the Bombardier-led consortium building them. To even get the program off the ground, Amtrak has had to begin refurbishing retired Metroliner locomotives in-house, a gradual process that could bring at least two additional regional trains to the line this summer. No schedule was available for the roll-out of the remaining three regional trains. The nature of the delay, and whether Bombardier, etc. are paying penalties for the overrun were not clear at press time.

Meanwhile, June brought reports of **further technical problems** with the Acela Express trains. Already stymied for over ten months trying to match high-speed, European-style wheels to aging American tracks, engineers on a test run between Washington DC and Newark recently discovered missing or loose bolts connecting the engine gear box to the locomotive's frame. Rectifying the problem is expected to push inauguration of express service back until at least mid-August.

Amtrak is banking its economic and political solvency on the success of the Acela program, plus expanding a nascent cargo business. **Market growth in the Boston-NYC corridor** appears to be targeted as the **back-bone of the Acela strategy**. The NorthEast Corridor is by far the busiest and most lucrative of all Amtrak lines; and while Amtrak already serves around 70% of combined NYC-DC air and rail trips, only 30% of NYC-Boston plane and train travelers took Amtrak last year.

Unfortunately, the railroad has been reduced in recent months to rolling out new cafeteria cars and a more robust passenger complaint policy, instead of new trains.

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



The Tri-State Transportation Campaign Web Site

www.tstc.org

MTR#277 Contributing: Janine Bauer, Lisa Schreibman Editors: Jon Orcutt, Kristen Fountain Executive Director, Janine Bauer

240 West 35th Street #801, New York, NY 10001 tel. (212) 268-7474 fax (212) 268-7333 email tstc@tstc.org

CALENDAR

July 20, Noon Metro-North RR Commuter Council, monthly meeting. 347 Madison Ave., Manhattan. 10th floor. 212-878-7087

July 20, 6-8pm Reception for winners of "Sunset Park: Beyond the Gowanus Expressway" design competition. St. Michael's Church, 361 43rd St, Brooklyn (N or R to 45th St.). SW Brooklyn Industrial Development Corp.

July 25, 6-9pm Auto-Free NY Walking Tour, "Harlem Transport Issues", Meet SE corner of 125th St. and Lexington Ave. 212-475-3394

July 28, 9:30am-12pm Public Hearing for the Regional Intergovernmental Coordinating Study-Commission (RITCSC) Interim Report with preliminary findings and recommendations on Transportation Development Districts (TDD) and regional transportation planning reform, Committee Room 11, NJ State House Annex, Trenton, ? Jon Carnegie 732-932-6812, ext. 700. <http://www.njleg.state.nj.us.html.reports.htm>

August 7, 9:30am CT Dept. of Environmental Protection hearing on Route 66 widening, DEP bldg., Russell Hearing Rm., 79 Elm St., Hartford. Call Kathy Kokoszka, 860-346-5321.

August 22, 6-9pm Auto-Free NY Walking Tour, "42nd St. Light Rail & Pedestrian Boulevard", Meet Grand Central upper level info booth. 212-475-3394

Goethals Twin May Still Haunt Planning Docs

Responding to an item in *MTR* #276, NYMTC has informed us that the Goethals Bridge twin project has never been factored into its clean air/transportation "conformity" analysis, and so was not "removed" from it, as we had written previously.

For years, NYMTC documents have identified the Goethals twin as a "project of regional significance." But the latest report singles it out as excluded from the conformity analysis. Presumably it will be included if the Port Authority decides to try to advance the project out of planning purgatory.

However, the project has pariah status in most quarters outside of the Port Authority staff and NY road agencies that have endorsed the concept of the "southern gateway": a huge truck route across Staten Island and southern Brooklyn to JFK Airport and Long Island.

The Port Authority is spending the next several months developing a multi-year capital program — it remains to be seen whether the agency will try to bring the Goethals twin back to life, maintain its current ghost status or bow to the inevitable and give it up.