

Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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NEWS

New Jersey Department of Transportation Charts Broad Defiance of New Law

The New Jersey DOT has released a draft of its 2000-2010 Capital Investment Strategy prior to a Dec. 18 North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority meeting. The document explicitly diverges from the highway and bridge maintenance goals established by the Legislature and Governor Whitman in the Transportation Trust Fund Renewal Act this summer. Those goals call for DOT to **fix half of the New Jersey's structurally deficient bridges and pavement** surfaces in the next five years. It appears that internal imperatives, not legislative mandates, are still driving DOT's program.

The new investment strategy document takes pains to avoid prominent mention of the Trust Fund law, and indicates that the DOT will seek to repudiate and defy these maintenance goals in each area of its program. Consider its statements in each key maintenance area:

National Highway System Bridges DOT projects the percentage of deficient NHS bridges, among the most heavily traveled in the state, to increase between now and 2005. DOT maintains its old goal of eliminating backlogged work by 2010, but attacks it at the same time, stating blandly that "The objective of eliminating the backlog of structural deficiency on NHS bridges by 2010 appears to be out of reach, if it was ever feasible." The section goes on to consider other goals, without ever mentioning this summer's legislative mandate.

Other State Bridges DOT projects no progress in reducing bridge deficiencies in this area, keeping the deficient share flat at 13% between now and 2006.

Local Bridges DOT cites its own old objective of reducing deficiencies in this area by 25% by 2010, with no reference to this year's legislative mandate. The agency says it could do more with an additional bond act, but doesn't refer to any of the funding made available by the Trust Fund renewal.

Pavement DOT projects deficient pavement to increase from 26% to 30% over the next five years. In addition to ignoring the 50% reduction goal set forth in the Trust Fund law, DOT further slaps the Legislature by complaining, in one of the document's few references to the new law, that the 2000 Trust Fund Renewal Act calls for a pavement maintenance program whose goals "are already being met."

Why can't NJ DOT meet the law's ambitious maintenance targets, given that the Legislature, Governor and

voters approved a \$3.8 billion four-year program, whose scale is roughly doubled to **about \$8 billion** by federal transportation assistance? Although the numbers are not yet clear, NJ DOT recently released two memos which each describe 40 highway projects. One set is at an early stage of development, so the nature and costs of the projects are hard to clarify, but even these studies will consume some capital funding. The second set is much closer to implementation, and 10 of the 40 projects listed are explicitly to widen highways.

It is clear at least **where the money is not going**. In the new strategy document, DOT largely abandons its 1998 goal of investing \$20 million to implement a significant set of **rail freight** improvement projects. DOT does not factor in any increase in **local aid** funding. And recent correspondence from the agency also indicates that it feels the Trust Fund law's mandate to construct 1,000 new **bikeway** miles within five years has already been met. That raises questions about when the DOT started counting — the law is clear that the bikeway projects are to be new mileage, starting with the Act's passage last July.

One of the main points of the Trust Fund legislation was the introduction of **transportation program accountability**. The law set clear goals to reduce the bureaucracy's ability to shape the program by fiat, or by manipulating slippery definitions and excuses. However, entrenched interests and cultures usually take time and ongoing vigilance to change, and NJ DOT apparently intends to do its best to ensure that this will be the case regarding transportation policy in New Jersey.

Port Authority Pricing Plan Proceeds

Port Authority commissioners voted yesterday to hold **public hearings** on the agency's plan to introduce congestion pricing and impose higher tolls at Hudson River crossings, and to raise PATH train fares.

Although hearing arrangements are not yet set, they will begin January 16 and likely continue during that week. Newspapers said the hearings will take place in **Manhattan, Staten Island, and Hudson and Bergen Counties**. Citizens and officials from those areas interested in traffic relief should attend the hearings and support the PA's move to congestion pricing. Details of the toll and fare plan are available from the PA (www.panynj.gov/pr/prprframe.htm) and in *MTR* #295.

Port Authority staff, in presenting the plan to the PA

board yesterday, referred frequently to plans to integrate transit fare collection among the various regional systems as a near term goal.

Gowanus HOV Lane: Why Wait for Worse ?

The NYS Dept. of Transportation seems in a muddle over how to manage carpool lanes. The DOT has told the Campaign it is hesitant to change rules governing access to the Gowanus Expressway carpool lane, which now allows any car with two occupants. That policy has led to congestion, as more and more cars use the lane. But the vast majority of passengers traveling in the lane are in express buses – many **transit users are suffering a slower and less reliable commute** because of a relatively small number of cars. DOT says its reluctance to change the rules to bus-only or three-per-car stems from concern that some traffic will be displaced to local streets and jammed general highway lanes.

But also, regarding more stringent access rules for the Gowanus HOV lane, the DOT's NYC regional director told the Staten Island *Advance* last week that, because of traffic growth, **"it'll have to be done sometime."**

DOT seems to want to wait until the HOV lane gets as bad as the rest of the Gowanus, which the AAA calls the worst highway in America. As it is, DOT says buses and carpools are only moving an average of 22 mph now, and some bus drivers say it's slower than that. When the HOV-2 lane finally fails, will the issue of traffic diversion go away? No, it will be worse. Why wait and make the move as painful as possible? DOT should do the right thing now and make the Gowanus special lane into a real express route for bus riders.



NY State DOT's LITP 2000 study purports to be a 20-year transportation strategy for Long Island, but it's been dubbed the "Long Island Total Paving" plan by environmentalists. Its main recommendation is construction of a huge network of HOV lanes and development of a new Long Island express bus system. DOT says the HOV lanes would be managed to **ensure free-flowing conditions** at all times **for the buses**. But DOT's willingness to let Gowanus express bus riders stew in bad HOV traffic appears to belie that promise, and further erodes the credibility of the LITP plan.

Harlem Line 3rd Track Gets Feds' Go-Ahead

An announcement last week by Metro-North Railroad announced the end of environmental review for the Harlem Line's Third Track Project. The FTA issued a "record of decision" for the project in November.

The project involves constructing **new track** along approximately **3.5 miles of the Harlem Line** between the Fleetwood and Crestwood stations, relieving a bottleneck and allowing local, express and reverse-peak service to increase (*MTR #282*). The Railroad projects Harlem Line demand to increase 50% by 2020, and says it can meet that demand with the additional capacity the track will provide.

Spotlight Back on Dangerous Driving

Mayor Giuliani told reporters last week he would do more to keep the issue of **drunk driving** and **traffic fatalities** in the public eye.

The *Daily News* reported that drunk driving-related deaths in New York City have increased 17% this year from last, despite the publicity in 1999 over the city's car seizure policy.

Transportation Alternatives pointed out that drunk driving is not the only — or the main — cause of traffic fatalities in the city, releasing these numbers:

NYC Traffic Fatalities	DWI Fatalities	DWI as % of fatalities	
2000*	346	27	8%
1999	417	23	5.5%
1990	701	72	10%

*As of 12/14/00, NYPD

Note: Hit and run fatalities not included here. Some experts estimate that 50% of hit and run crashes involve a drunk driver.

The *NY Post* seemed to anticipate this week's events and stories with a Tuesday editorial that, responding to new DWI legislation introduced in Albany, criticized legal loopholes that let most deadly drivers in NY State walk.

"The laws should be rewritten to **cover all drivers** — impaired or not — **whose recklessness takes lives**, but who are punished by little more than a slap on the wrist," wrote the *Post*.

Queens Boulevard — How Many Will Die in 2001 ?

The death of yet another pedestrian, this time a 14-year old girl named Sofia Leviyev, on Queens Boulevard spurred more than 100 local residents to block the street in protest this past Sunday. Unfortunately her death does not come as a surprise. On Queens Boulevard, there has been on average **one pedestrian killed by an automobile per month** and more than one non-fatal accident per week since 1993.

Newspapers jumped on the story with headlines such as "Concrete River of Death," "The Street That's Out of Control" and "Ready, Start, Die,"

The City DOT responded by saying it will speed up implementation of a \$3 million "improvement program," which will install a fence along the median of the street and create high-visibility crosswalks at certain intersections. Both of these improvements focus on **changing pedestrian rather than motorist behavior**.

The agency has not responded to letters sent in November from community groups and the Campaign calling on it to slow the traffic through low-cost signal timing and long-term street design changes. According to the City DOT's report, on which the agency is basing its plan, 2/3 of all Queens Boulevard drivers exceed the speed limit and 1/4 drive at **40 mph or faster**. The report lists one of the causes of the excessive speed as the light timing, which permits cars to move at 38 mph without needing to stop for signals.

Nor has the agency begun to address another major point raised in the report — excessive road width without adequate crossing time or medians to stand on. The report states that at rush hour, there is not enough time to cross the street in one light. But pedestrians who need to

NJ E-ZPass Consortium Projects Deficit - Big Revenue Shortfall Possible -

At a December 9th press conference in East Brunswick, the Regional E-ZPass Consortium — which includes NJ toll roads, the Port Authority and the Delaware DOT — released revised financial projections that downgraded the system's expected 2008 \$35 million profit margin to a \$65 million deficit. The unanticipated public enthusiasm in New Jersey for E-ZPass, additional construction work, and the fact that only a small percentage of expected toll violator revenue has been collected this year all contributed to the recalculation. E-ZPass operations on the **NJ Turnpike** and **Garden State Parkway** account for the anticipated shortfall.

Initial accounting for the Parkway and Turnpike assumed that only 35% of all highway users would want E-ZPass accounts. Actual **demand has already far exceeded this amount**: 50% of Turnpike drivers are paying with E-ZPass, while usage is 41% on the GSP. Costs of this success so far is almost \$80 million for purchase of additional tags, extra credit card processing fees and per transaction costs charged by the contractor running the E-ZPass system. The drain has been offset somewhat by a \$39 million windfall from the leasing of extra space on the system's fiber-optic cable lines.

Consortium members and NJ Transportation Commissioner James Weinstein assured reporters that the deficit would not lead to increased tolls on either of the big NJ toll highways. The consortium agreement will spell the NJ agencies somewhat, but the Turnpike and the Parkway will bear the majority of the burden.

Observers worry, however, that the deficit will continue to grow. The *Star Ledger* reported that the consortium budget assumes revenue from toll violators will top \$100 million in 2001 and \$94 million in 2002. But over the past year only \$4 million has been collected, though defenders say the low figure resulted from the belated inauguration of E-ZPass on the Turnpike.

If the budget gap multiplies to hundreds of millions, it is unclear whether the Turnpike and, particularly, the Parkway, whose capital budget is already underfunded (MTR #296), would have the funds for a bailout. Although it would be possible for both agencies to avoid any big financial problems until closer to the end of the E-ZPass contract in 2008, doing so could foist the issue of an E-ZPass bail-out into negotiations over the next round of funding for NJ's Transportation Trust Fund in 2004. A nearer term New Jersey Highway Authority toll increase is likely a better solution that could simultaneously give the Parkway the funds needed to upgrade their barrier-toll plazas to allow non-stop tolling, and join the regional movement towards congestion pricing.

use medians to cross in two lights are often out of luck. It says, "intersections with left-turn lanes on Queens Blvd. are created by reducing the width of the normally adequate (15 foot) center mall... to three or four feet in width... At a number of intersections, the medians do not extend through the crosswalks [and consequently pedestrians] are left unprotected in the roadway."

NJTransit Study Documents Unmet Needs

Ridership growth on NJTransit rail lines and buses is **exceeding growth in service**, and a significant percentage of both the rail and bus fleet are older than the standard age of retirement. These were among the chief findings of a study just completed for NJ Transit and presented at the agency's board meeting last Wednesday. The study compared NJTransit with the Long Island Rail Road, Metro-North, SEPTA, and the MBTA on five measures of cost efficiency and service for the years 1994-1999. While **NJ does well on most measures**, most of its successes have a flip-side which portray an agency **strapped for funds**.

NJTransit's cost per vehicle increased at a rate much lower than New Jersey's consumer price index, only 1.1% for rail and 8.2% for buses to the CPI's 11%. The result gives NJTransit the second lowest operating cost per vehicle among the systems compared. But this may reflect an agency spending less on needed upgrades and service as much as it does administrative belt-tightening. This suspicion gains ground in other statistics. Costs per passenger mile during the same period showed no growth whatsoever, and the **average age of the bus and rail fleets** increased by close to two years. The study found that 53% of buses have been in service for more than twelve years and 28% of vehicles in the commuter rail fleets are older than twenty-five years.

What these numbers likely don't reflect are the 650 new diesel-powered transit buses and 1,400 new diesel longer-distance cruiser buses that NJTransit has ordered and has received or will receive within the next few years. The agency also intends to obtain 200 single-level rail cars next year and 200 new bi-level cars by 2004. New trains and buses will **mainly replace the aging fleet** rather than boost its size.

Although brief, the presentation of study results is likely to help impress state legislators on the need for both increased mass transit capital and operating funds in coming years.

Long Island Local

The Central Islip Main Street Alliance is considering a closed loop **trolley bus service** that would link the court complex, shopping centers north of Suffolk Avenue and the LIRR station. The local transit service would complement the LIRR **station access jitney** likely to begin service in the hamlet in February, thanks to collaborative work by Islip officials, the Tri-State Transportation Campaign and NY State DOT's Long Island Region Improving Commuting grant program. A Central Islip

survey conducted by the Alliance and State Senate Transportation Chair Cesar Trunzo found strong support for new local transit services.

At a press conference in Lake Ronkonkoma last Monday, Brookhaven civic, business and transportation groups, including Affiliated Brookhaven Civic Organization, the Tri-State Campaign and the Lake Ronkonkoma Historical Society called on Suffolk County to **reconsider the widening of Suffolk Route 16**, also known as Portion Road. The Suffolk County Department of Public Works announced plans to turn the road into a five lane, high-speed roadway at a public hearing a year ago.

The groups, which have been considering issues related to the project for much of this year, called on Suffolk to consider issues of induced traffic demand, safety for motorists, pedestrians and cyclists and quality of life issues, and asked that county planners consider a limited reconstruction that would include turn lanes, bike and pedestrian accommodations and some arterial traffic calming measures.

Give a gift
that won't go
up in smoke



Last year, the president of the New Jersey chapter of the American Planning Association said, "If the Tri-State Transportation Campaign didn't exist, we'd have to invent it."

That's because of the real-world changes and developments we're able to bring about, like gathering support within toll agencies and the public for congestion pricing, New Jersey transportation legislation that sets clear capital program goals, and keeping the pressure on in highway corridors in Long Island, New Jersey, the Hudson Valley and NYC.

Victories like these are why the New York Motorist Association has described us as "vocal and well organized."

You can help us maintain our voice in the debates that will shape the future of the Tri-State metropolitan region. If you had a good year, help us start the next one in better shape than ever.

Make tax-deductible contributions payable to the Tri-State Transportation Campaign.

**240 West 35th Street, # 801,
New York, NY 10001**

CALENDAR

December 19, 6-8pm Auto Free New York meeting, "The Case for Public Investment in Intercity Rail Passenger Service," Governor James J. Florio. 104 Washington St., Manhattan, 212-475-3394 geohaikalis@juno.com

December 18, 9:30am MTA Board Finance Committee, 347 Madison Ave., Manhattan. 5th floor. 212-878-7178.

December 19, 9:30am MTA Board meeting, 347 Madison Ave., Manhattan. 5th fl. 212-878-7178.

January 4, 10am New Jersey Alliance for Action briefing on the Port Authority of NY/NJ Capital Plan, NJTPA building, 1 Newark Center, 17th Fl, Newark, \$, 732-225-4694

January 15. Deadline for paper submittals for Sept. TrailLink 2001 rail-trail conference, St. Louis. Contact Rails to Trails Conservancy, 202-974-5152, www.railtrails.org

January 16 Port Authority hearings on Cross-Hudson toll and PATH fare increase likely to begin and continue during this week at separate sessions in Manhattan, Staten Island, Hudson County, Bergen County.

January 17, 7pm Connecticut Rail Commuter Council meeting, New Haven Railroad Station, 203-655-0138 or www.trainweb.org/ct

January 23, 6pm MTA public hearing on service plan for 63rd Street subway connector (E, F, R, G, 7 and new "V" trains are affected). Long Island City High School, 14-30 Broadway, Queens. Those wishing to speak can sign up until 7 pm the day of the hearing, or call 212-878-7483.

February 9 NYU Rudin Transportation Center annual Tri-State Transit symposium. CUNY Graduate Center, Manhattan. 212-998-7545.

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



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