

# Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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## NEWS

### Toll-Bashing As 2001 Campaign Strategy NYC Candidates Go After MTA Tolls

At a January candidate forum sponsored by the Village Independent Democrats, two New York City mayoral hopefuls said abolishing tolls at MTA bridges would improve city traffic conditions. Village residents and elected leaders have advocated returning two-way tolls to the Verrazano Narrows Bridge. Since a steep one-way Verrazano toll was implemented in 1985, truck and other **traffic has become hellish on the free Brooklyn-NJ route** across lower Manhattan via the Williamsburg and Manhattan Bridges and the Holland Tunnel.

Bronx Borough President Ferdinand Ferrer told listeners that **tolls should be removed entirely** from the Verrazano Bridge, according to *The Villager*. City Council Speaker Peter Vallone upped the ante, stating, "I don't think New Yorkers should be charged for traveling anywhere on the roads."

Complete removal of Verrazano tolls may or may not have the desired effect in lower Manhattan. It would without question open another major funding gap at the MTA, which is struggling to finance its 2000-2004 capital program. Eliminating all MTA tolls would without question lead to **big increases in urban motoring**, wipe out capital and maintenance funding for MTA bridges and tunnels and send mass transit finances reeling. Radical toll reduction in NYC could also give trucks such a competitive advantage that freight railroads would be unlikely to ever develop a serious foothold in the east-of-Hudson freight market.

MTA bridge and tunnel tolls gross over \$900 million per year, more than one-third of which is distributed to MTA's transit agencies.

City Comptroller Alan Hevesi offered a more considered response to traffic issues by endorsing the cross-Harbor rail freight tunnel proposal which would provide an alternative to trucks, removing them from the streets

### NJ Dark Horse Opens with Broadside Against Parkway Tolls

Opening a statewide tour to kick off his campaign for Governor of New Jersey, Jersey City Mayor Bret Schundler called for abolition of tolls on the Garden State Parkway last week. The *Asbury Park Press* reports that Schundler said eliminating tolls will reduce Parkway crashes and ease air pollution and wear and tear on cars. However, such a move is likely to do the opposite.

The absence of the \$185 million the NJ Highway

### NJDOT Budget: Road Expansion on par with Repair Spending

The NJ DOT capital budget distributed at a North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority meeting this week indicates that, despite the "fix-it-first" legislation accompanying reauthorization of the Transportation Trust Fund last year, New Jersey **highway expansion spending will keep pace with roadway maintenance outlays** over the next three years. (MTR #298).

An NJDOT spreadsheet shows that "congestion management" and "strategic mobility" projects — which are generally lane additions and new bypasses — will cost \$1 billion during 2002-2004. Bridge and roadway preservation spending will total \$1.24 billion during the same period. Environmental and pro-transit groups, municipalities and other constituencies supported a multi-year increase in state transportation spending with the understanding that DOT's program would emphasize maintenance and repair. DOT has said **it cannot meet the ambitious repair targets the legislation sets**, but it is hard to sympathize with such claims when DOT seems able to allocate \$1 billion to competing areas.

DOT's chart shows a spike in maintenance spending and a slackening in road expansion categories in 2005. An optimistic interpretation is that road expansion projects now in the pipeline will be finished, and maintenance can finally become the state's priority. However, the numbers for 2005 and 2006 are untrustworthy "out year" estimates that DOT does not have to live by. They can change radically over the next few years.

The budget also shows an increase in rail freight spending in 2002, which drops away again in later years, and a hike in local aid funds.

Authority receives in toll revenues each year will force the Parkway to compete for resources within NJ DOT's budget. Pavement and bridge deficiencies along the Parkway could worsen under this scenario, causing more wear on cars and potentially increasing road hazards.

Air quality and traffic speeds would also suffer. The elimination of tolls could **increase congestion by drawing cars now making local trips** on Routes 1, 9, and 35 to the Parkway. In fact, the only currently untolled portion of the Parkway from the Raritan River to the Union toll plaza attracts so many extra trips that it was expanded to ten lanes and is often still backed up.

A Schundler supporter told the *Asbury Park Press* that what aggravates her is "sitting at the tolls." Although a

small group of anti-toll activists have received attention in the wake of Schundler's candidacy, the **source of the widespread frustration with Parkway** conditions is not the tolls themselves, but **the antiquated toll plazas** drivers wait behind to pay them. Rather than eradicating tolls, a practical leader would push to raze the booths.

Schundler's main rival in the Republican primary in June, Acting Governor and State Senate President Donald DiFrancesco, could do that by supporting Assembly bill A35 that would force the Highway Authority to replace old booths with non-stop electronic toll readers that drivers can pass through at normal highway speeds.

### CT House Leader Calls for More Transpo Funds

In a speech last week outlining her priorities, State House Speaker Moira Lyons asked an audience of Southwestern CT business and municipal leaders to actively support her bid for greater the transportation spending needed to solve the region's growing gridlock.

The *Advocate* quoted Lyons saying, "At some point, we're going to have to raise a lot of money, and people won't be happy about it. I hope you're part of a group who will carry that message that we need to do this."

Lyons also chastised them for not giving her the political capital she needed to **oppose the 7-cent gas tax cut championed by Governor Rowland** last year. She dryly called the cut "not a particularly good idea," noting it will cost Connecticut \$1 billion in transportation funds over the next ten years (*MTR* #268). "I can get you a lot of money," she said, "But it doesn't matter if you're not making phone calls."

The Southwest Area Commerce and Industry Association has been an active player in Connecticut's transportation politics. The regional business council was a member of the Coastal Corridor Coalition that successfully championed legislation mandating congestion reduction goals in the I-95 southwest corridor (*MTR* #134). Association president Chris Bruehl, also a member of the Governor's Transportation Strategy Board, told the *Advocate* that he **accepted the Speaker's challenge** and would encourage his members to sound the message "loud and clear."

### Locking in Anti-Diesel Gains

NY State Senator Tom Duane is asking citizens and organizations to write to U.S. Senators Schumer and Clinton, to urge them to fight efforts in Washington to roll back new, tighter rules on diesel emissions from heavy-duty vehicles (see *MTR* #270).

Duane was a key figure in the fight to **close down NY Apple Tours**, the NYC double-decker tour bus outfit whose vehicles became synonymous with black clouds of diesel soot and whose drivers were well-known for bad behavior at the wheel. A NY State appellate court ordered NY Apple Tours to cease operations in December, concluding a back and forth court and administrative battle that first saw Apple Tours booted off the streets, then allowed to reopen last summer.

### The State of Cycling in NYC

The winter edition of Transportation Alternatives magazine gives cycling in NYC slightly improved marks over last year. T.A.'s fourth annual report on the state of bicycling in the city gives the "cycling environment" a C- and "government effort a C+. The grades are up from last year's D+ and C-, respectively.

The improved view of cycling conditions largely stems from a decline in cycling deaths from their historic high in 2000 (35 deaths) to a **more routine 17 fatalities**. Still, T.A. characterizes conditions as "barely tolerable enough to keep everyday cyclists riding. Dangerous motorist behavior, atrocious street conditions and many sub-standard bike lanes remain widespread."

Better government effort is reflected in significant bridge-related improvements by NYC DOT. In 2000, the 24-hour **Queensboro Bridge bike- and ped-way** opened for good, with improved access points in Queens and Manhattan. Transportation Alternatives has fought since 1979 to maintain or restore 24-hour access over the span. "At last, a giant, multi-decade obstacle to cycling between Manhattan, Queens and northern Brooklyn is gone," T.A. writes. A even longer-lived gap in East River bike and pedestrian access, the lack of a path across the **Manhattan Bridge**, will be closed this spring with the May opening of a restored bike/footway. The span has been closed to walkers and cyclists since World War II. T.A. also gives NYC DOT good marks for the new Centre Street bike lane, which extends from the Brooklyn Bridge bike path, for a new bike lane on the Bronx' Prospect Avenue and for bike-friendly re-design of Herald Square.

The highest overall rating goes to NYC Transit's continuing policy allowing common-sense **bike access to NYC subways**, and to the Port Authority's abolition of the permit system for bike access to off-peak PATH trains. Paradoxically, the MTA drags down bridge and transit access grades with lousy conditions (or no paths) on its bridges, and its refusal to consider a bike parking facility at Grand Central Terminal. **Transportation Alternatives: [www.transalt.org](http://www.transalt.org), 212-629-8080**

### NY Thruway: About Face on GWB Toll Impact

New York State Thruway Executive Director John Platt recently told the *Journal News* that his agency did not expect much traffic to divert to the Tappan Zee Bridge as a result of the toll increases that will impact Port Authority crossings starting March 25th.

Platt's optimism contradicts a Thruway official cited in the *Journal News* before the PA toll increase was approved. It also belies analysis the newspaper undertook that found toll hikes at the George Washington Bridge have **directly preceded the three highest percentage traffic increases** on the Tappan Zee in the last thirty years (*MTR* #301).

Platt said the Thruway Authority is not considering a toll increase or time-varied tolls to combat any commuter route-changing the George Washington Bridge

hike might cause. The agency now says the Port Authority increase will have minimal effect on I-287 traffic because congestion there is so bad that **GWB drivers are likely to pay more rather than submit to Tappan Zee delays** (an argument one could make in support of Tappan Zee congestion pricing!).

The Thruway's change of heart is probably mostly keyed to political timing. Candidates are already jockeying for position for the **2002 NY State governor's race**, and incumbents generally rule out toll and fare increases heading into an electoral contest.

Introducing congestion pricing elsewhere in the region has been successful when coupled with a toll increase justified by a need for revenue. The Thruway Authority does not appear to be at the point of needing to raise money, though that situation will change dramatically if anything in the form of a **Tappan Zee replacement bridge** is ultimately approved. That will come after a lengthy period of study and debate, conveniently pushing all of these issues past the November, 2002 election.

### **NJ Bergen Arches Right-of-Way For Sale**

An item on the agenda for next week's NJ Transit board meeting indicates the agency will likely exercise an option to acquire the Bergen Arches rail right-of-way from the residual Conrail "shared assets area" freight railroad at nominal cost.

NJ Transit's option to obtain the route was acquired during the planning agreement that set the route for the Hudson-Bergen light rail line. **Conrail is now moving to formally abandon the Bergen Arches right-of-way** -- an abandonment proceeding is before the U.S. Surface Transportation Board.

With the Hudson-Bergen line now operating through Bayonne and Jersey City on other routes, it is unclear what NJ Transit might do with the Bergen Arches right-of-way.

A troubling scenario would be a transfer of the corridor **from Transit to its parent agency, NJDOT, for highway development**. Jersey City mayor and gubernatorial candidate Brett Schundler wants a highway connection through the Arches to provide additional car access from the Turnpike to Jersey City's waterfront and the Holland Tunnel. An NJDOT study is looking at this and other scenarios, including passenger and freight rail use of the corridor.

CSX and Norfolk Southern railroads, which do not control the rump Conrail, have said that the potential for a freight traffic boom in the NY/NJ port area, including development of the Bayonne military ocean terminal into a deep water container port, could lead to conditions where the Bergen Arches would provide needed rail freight capacity. **The Surface Transportation Board should consider the projections for NY/NJ port business** that many agencies are now using, and the underdevelopment of rail freight in the metropolitan region as it takes up the abandonment proceeding.

However, if a bad spill-over effect from the Port Authority hike does materialize, it would not be a surprise if Tappan Zee drivers begin to suspect that the Thruway's unwillingness to implement near-term anti-congestion measures is an attempt to hold them hostage to approval of the replacement bridge plan.

### **Bronx Study: Lesson in Agency Balkanization**

On February 8, the New York State Department of Transportation presented a list of options it will study in its "major investment study" of the Cross Bronx and Major Deegan Expressway corridors (*MTR #303*). The list included big-ticket highway, transit, rail-freight, and pedestrian projects. However, since **agencies rarely use each other's studies to develop transportation plans**, and since the MPO process in the region has so far not produced any multi-agency approaches to any specific issues, it is very unlikely that a non-roadway related project will spring from the study.

That is a shame, since the working group participants who represent both residents and workers in the Bronx, were nearly consensual in their goals. First, they viewed the congestion problem as one of too many vehicles not too little roadway. As a result, **they favored transit and rail-freight options** that might relieve congestion by reducing the number of vehicles. Second, they stated that the Cross Bronx Expressway with its deep trenches damages neighborhoods on its sides. As a result, the participants favored decking it over and placing a greenway/transit rail line on top. Even tolling presently untolled roads met with widespread approval. Finally, there was a call for all modes to be treated equitably in the recommendation process. One participant said "you can't spend a billion dollars on the highways and a hundred million on everything else."

When questioned how a transit project that could aid expressway congestion problems would be implemented, the MIS's manager stated "we are working very carefully under the MPO and with our sister agencies." But **other agencies would need to "carry the ball** in developing a pure transit option." Although NY State DOT provides transit and freight rail service, the project manager stated that in the context of this project "that the agency will remain a highway developer."

### **Amtrak Begins Frequent Traveler Program**

Amtrak has established a frequent-rider program, similar to the incentive plans airlines have used for many years. Regular train riders can accumulate "guest reward" points based on ticket costs, which can later be redeemed for additional tickets or other services like car rentals. Train riders can open accounts under the program via the internet, at [www.amtrak.com](http://www.amtrak.com).

Unfortunately, like many other aspects of Amtrak, the frequent-rider program features **a degree of built-in sluggishness**. The web site explains that earned points will not show up in an individual's account until 1-3 months after tickets are purchased.

## MNRR CT Passengers Note Ongoing Decline in Cleanliness and Seats

Metro North Railroad's annual customer service survey results show growing dissatisfaction among Connecticut MTA riders. New Haven line respondents gave their line lower marks in every category queried in comparison to the Hudson and Harlem lines, particularly voicing complaints about increased crowding on trains, dirty cars, and a lack of available parking at rail stations, reported the CT Rail Commuter Council last week.

A Metro North spokesperson said seats are available in most trains, but many passengers choose to stand instead of taking a middle seat. But CT Commuter Council Vice Chairman, Jim Cameron countered that crowding is occurring now because ridership has been increasing in recent years, but **no new cars have been added**. ConnDOT public transit chief, Harry Harris seemed to agree, telling the *Stamford Advocate* that crowding occurs when the line's thirty-plus year old rail cars must be taken out of service due to weather repair.

Harris also said that rail car cleanliness has been sacrificed due to rolling stock limitations. Dozens of additional train runs have been scheduled over the last year to meet surging demand. As a result, **existing cars are working overtime** and do not remain in the stations long enough to be properly cleaned.

Additional monies last year allowed ConnDOT to order 10 new rail cars - one train worth - to arrive by next year. Cameron believes that addition will be too small to bring on noticeable improvement. Obtaining money for a larger order of cars should be a top priority legislative priority this year, he said.

### Ledger Gets Star for PA Coverage

Our coverage of news media coverage of the Port Authority congestion pricing proposal (*MTR #302*), complained of a press drumbeat on the theme of "\$7 tolls!" and stated that "No news outlet ever reported the Port Authority's estimate that the average passenger car toll under its proposal would be \$4.99."

The *Star-Ledger* responded that it had presented the Port Authority's figure in its coverage on November 24, December 14 and 15 and on January 1 and 12. In the *Ledger's* case, we clearly stand corrected. However, we believe our main point is still accurate. The **Ledger's coverage was the exception that proved the rule**, especially concerning radio and TV coverage, and newspaper headlines, which tend to set the "buzz" about an issue far more than the inside text of news articles.

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



Mobilizing the Region

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## CALENDAR

**February 20, 7pm** Democratic Leadership for the 21st Century Forum, Congressman Jerold Nadler, "The Cross-Harbor Railroad Tunnel and the Future of New York's Waterfront", LAVA, 28 West 20th Street (betw. 5th & 6th Aves.), ?'s 212-529-0611

**February 21, 9:00a.m.** NJTransit Board of Directors meeting, NJ Transit Headquarter's Building, One Penn Plaza East, Newark, New Jersey, ?'s973-491-8800

**February 21, 5:30pm** NYC Transit Rider's Council President's Forum, with NYC Transit President Lawrence Reuter. 347 Madison Ave. 5th floor, Manhattan. 212-878-7087 [www.pcac.org](http://www.pcac.org)

**February 21, 7:30 pm** Connecticut Rail Commuters Council monthly meeting, SACIA, 2nd Floor, 1 Landmark Sq., Stamford, CT, ?'s [www.trainweb.org/ct](http://www.trainweb.org/ct)

**February 22, noon** NYC Transit Riders Council meeting, 347 Madison Avenue, 5th Floor Boardroom, ?'s 212-878-7087, [www.pcac.org](http://www.pcac.org)

**February 22, 1:15pm** NYMTC Program, Finance, Administration Committee meeting, One World Trade Center, Suite 82 E., NYC, 212-938-3300

**February 26, 9:30am** MTA Board of Directors meeting, 347 Madison Ave., Manh., 212 878-7178

**February 26, 1pm** Women's City Club Lecture, "Olympic Dream or Urban Nightmare", by Alex Garvin, Director of Planning for NYC 2012, 35 E. 21st St. Manhattan, 212-353-8070

**February 26-27** NY Public Transit Association winter conference. Desmond Americana hotel, Albany. Sessions on mass transit budget outlook, transit advocacy. Legislative reception. \$. 518-434-9060, [www.nytransit.org](http://www.nytransit.org)

**February 27, 6-8pm** Auto-Free NY meeting: "Using Pricing to Ease Congestion — Manhattan Canal Street Corridor." Brian Ketcham, Community Consulting Inc. 104 Washington Street, Manhattan. 212-475-3394 [www.auto-free.org](http://www.auto-free.org)

**March 2, 10am** NYC Council Committee on Transportation hearing on bills 852 and 855 to prohibit the use of cell phones while driving, Council Chambers, City Hall, 2nd Fl., Manhattan, ?s 212-788-7210

The Tri-State Transportation Campaign Web Site

[www.tstc.org](http://www.tstc.org)