

Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

Number 307

March 5, 2001

NEWS

Schumer Pushes Major Hike in Federal Transit Tax Benefit

A bill introduced by NY Senator Charles Schumer would increase the amount of pre-tax income employees could set-aside for mass transit and van-pooling fares. The bill, "the **Commuter Benefits Equity Act**" which Schumer introduced with Sen. John Warner of Virginia, a senior Republican on the Environment and Public Works Committee, would hike the monthly pre-tax transit spending ceiling to **\$175 per month** starting in 2002. The current transit limit now is \$65 per month, far below the pre-tax \$175 per month federal law now allows car commuters for parking benefits.

In New York and Connecticut, the pre-tax provisions also apply to state taxes.

"The mass transit subsidy program is a great idea, but it is undermined by the fact that **we provide a parking benefit that is much more generous,**" Schumer said at a February press conference in Mineola. "My proposal rewards commuters who choose mass transit and makes drivers think twice about getting in their cars. For Long Island commuters who use the LIRR, this increase could mean hundreds of dollars per year in savings."

The bill was also introduced in the House by Massachusetts Rep. James McGovern. The legislation is so far co-sponsored by a wide range of the region's Senators and Representatives, including CT's Senator Christopher Dodd and NY Representatives Maurice Hinchey, Carolyn McCarthy, Jerrold Nadler and Edward Towns.

—Pataki Proposes TransitChek for State Workers—

A provision in Governor Pataki's 2001-02 executive budget would extend the pre-tax transit benefit to **NY State employees**. New York City already offers the benefit to many city workers. Governor Rowland has proposed the same for Connecticut state employees (see *MTR* #290). A New Jersey bill would also give state workers the federal transit tax benefit, but it has not been approved by either house of the Legislature.

Inside

- **L.I. Bus riders demand more service**
- **Traffic calming works**
- **Traffic calming: an agenda for NYC**
- **Green backs calming plan for Queens Boulevard**

McGreevey Links Highways, Sprawl

Democratic candidate for New Jersey governor and Woodbridge mayor Jim McGreevey told the *Star-Ledger* last week that he would order state agencies to make large-scale spending decisions based on the NJ State Plan. McGreevey called in particular for a new statewide transportation plan that emphasizes congestion relief and **keeps new highway construction projects out** of State Plan areas designated **rural or environmentally sensitive**.

The restriction on highway expansion was debated as an anti-sprawl amendment to the NJ Transportation Trust Fund reauthorization last summer, but was ultimately deleted from the legislation.

Acting Governor Donald DiFrancesco endorsed revisions to the State Plan that the NJ Planning Commission adopted last week. DiFrancesco said he would back **tax incentives** to encourage urban relocation. He was quiet on the issue of tighter sewer rules first proposed by Governor Whitman, which would impose stricter environmental standards on new developments outside of designated growth areas.

A recent Eagleton poll found that 80% of respondents agreed with the Plan's goals, saying that it was very important or somewhat important to them to ease traffic, preserve open space, and revitalize cities. But only 5% believed that the State Plan has been a success in slowing the spread of sprawl. Environmentalists point out that 350,000 acres of open space have been lost to development in New Jersey since its adoption in 1992.

NJDOT: Above the Law?

Flush with additional Transportation Trust Fund revenue, the New Jersey Department of Transportation presented a record \$2.66 billion 2002 capital budget to the legislature last Thursday. Transportation watchdogs immediately criticized the budget and the capital investment strategy document that accompanied it for **failing to deliver on goals** for the new funds set forth in the **2000 Transportation Trust Fund Renewal Act**.

DOT's proposal completely rejects the Trust Fund legislation's mandate to reduce the backlog of structurally deficient bridge repair projects in half as **"not feasible."** The agency did not provide a plan to ever reach the goal in any year, and asserts that fixing the road pavement surfaces would require an additional \$400 million and fixing the bridges would cost \$2.6 billion. It dispensed with the required explanation of

how the annual capital program met the “fix it first” goals and priorities of the Trust Fund law.

In fact, NJ DOT actually reduced the amount of money it plans to spend on bridge repairs for FY2002 from last year’s 2002 projection. In FY2001, DOT proposed to spend \$458 million on bridges, and expected to spend \$295 million in 2002. DOT now proposes to spend just \$276 million on bridge preservation in FY 2002. Road preservation figures remained largely the same, at about \$185 million.

Beyond Budget Cuts:

Nassau Bus Advocates Demand More Service

A week after Nassau County Comptroller Fred Parola announced a FY2000 \$48.3 million **county surplus**, transit advocates handed out thousands of leaflets at the Hempstead Transit Center, one of the major route hubs in the Long Island Bus system. The flyers called on riders to contact Nassau County elected officials to demand that a small part of the surplus be used to offer increased L.I. Bus service.

“We asked bus riders to tell County Executive Gulotta and the County Legislature that the community needs the bus service it has and more,” said the Tri-State Campaign’s Chris Hewitt. “Recent increases in ridership show that Nassau residents want to use buses. They need a convenient, efficient system.”

The bus company serves a **record 110,000 passengers per day** and has seen consistent ridership growth in recent years. Steady ridership gains over the past five years have increased crowding on many lines, and suggests that even more would choose bus transport if LI Bus could afford to offer more frequent service.

The surplus resulted from \$25 million in state bailout funds, a one-shot \$25 million settlement with the Long Island Power Authority, and \$42 million in debt restructuring. But regardless of the source, a small portion of Nassau County’s extra funds would be well spent **increasing Long Island Bus service**. Although a small and essential line item in the County’s \$2.2 billion budget, Long Island Bus has suffered disproportionately from its fiscal crisis.

County leaders have hit bus riders with big budget cuts over the last two years. County Executive Gulotta reduced the County’s \$20 million annual L.I. Bus contribution by more than one-third in January, 2000. These cuts threatened to force the agency to scale back service by 35%. The 2001 budget reduces County support for the bus system even further, to \$7 million and the long-term budget the County submitted to the Nassau Interim Finance Authority **would shut off all County funding** for Long Island Bus by 2003.

During the fiscal meltdown, service cuts have been averted thanks to emergency state support secured by State Senator Dean Skelos and Assemblyman Thomas DiNapoli, and cooperation from the Pataki Administration. But Long Island Bus still faces crowding and more riders without a stable source of funding.

Meanwhile, NJ DOT is proposing to spend **\$71 million on new sprawl-inducing highways** in its “strategic mobility” category, and tens of millions more for added lane capacity in another category.

“The law was intended to make DOT to change its spending priorities to meet specific bridge and road repair goals. DOT has to stop making excuses and start fixing the roads and bridges,” Tri-State Campaign director Janine Bauer said in a release last week.

Signed into law last July, the Transportation Trust Fund Renewal Act assigns additional portions of gas and sales taxes to transportation capital budgets, amounting to about \$4 billion for NJDOT and NJ Transit over four years. The law requires DOT to create a “capital investment strategy” that charts reductions in “the backlog of projects, including **one-half of structurally deficient bridge repair projects** and [road] **pavement deficiencies**,” and to “increase...lane miles of bicycle paths, with a goal of constructing an additional 1,000 lane miles of bicycle paths in five years.” DOT was required to fund projects to meet these and other goals such as reducing vehicular and pedestrian accidents in its annual capital program.

The budget will now be reviewed by the Legislature. Public hearings will follow in April and May. The entire plan must be approved before June 30, 2001, the end of the fiscal year.

Green Backs Queens Boulevard Calming Plan

Last week, NYC Public Advocate Mark Green proposed a list of six low-cost measures to **increase pedestrian safety** along Queens Boulevard. Speeding traffic and short crossing times were listed in a NYC DOT report as main reasons that there have been 73 pedestrian deaths along the Boulevard since 1993 (*MTR #280*).

Green’s proposals are:

- Increase crossing time for pedestrians.
- Widen the medians.
- Set traffic lights so that cars are not encouraged to travel faster than the speed limit.
- Delay the green light signal for tuning vehicles.
- Install raised crosswalks.
- Install red light cameras.

He also suggested pursuing federal funding for a plan to re-make the boulevard into a more pedestrian-friendly street, like that planned for the Bronx’ Grand Concourse.

Green’s suggestions are in tune with recommendations from transportation reform advocates and community groups to return the road to “Boulevard” status (*MTR #299*). They contrast sharply with Mayor Giuliani’s approach, which has recommended very minor fixes along the boulevard and, recently, **unsustainably heavy deployment of police**. The city administration’s latest suggestion is to build **pedestrian bridges** over the boulevard, which would give the streetscape even more of a cars-first, highway character.

NYC Traffic Calming: an Agenda for 2001

Points compiled from articles in the Winter, 2001 *Transportation Alternatives* magazine:

Put the NYC traffic calming law to use In September, 1999, Governor Pataki signed a law permitting NYC to set speed limits as low as 15mph on streets with traffic calming treatments. The city has not yet made use of its new authority. The city should implement a series of slow street pilot projects in neighborhoods in each borough.

Build the Bronx safe routes to school projects Being hit by a car is the #1 cause of death for kids aged 5-14 in New York City. The Bronx is leading all boroughs in percentage of children hit. Transportation Alternatives, in conjunction with the Bronx Borough President's office, has developed plans for safe routes to school for nearly 40 Bronx elementary schools. But to date, only one of the plans has been fully implemented.

Get moving on Grand Concourse redesign The Grand Concourse is one of the most dangerous streets for pedestrians in the city. The NYC DOT has a pot of \$9 million in federal funds earmarked for the street. But the city has not been able to develop a satisfactory plan to use the money — the project continues to languish.

Develop clear guidelines for installing speed humps and other traffic calming devices. The city needs a uniform process for deciding where traffic calming is needed. Presently requests in different boroughs are subjected to different agency and community board procedures, and many requests are taking years to fill.

Midtown's Pedestrian Gridlock

The NYC Fashion Center Business Improvement District recently released statistics showing that **pedestrian volumes in Manhattan's garment district are up 22%** from four years ago. Anyone attempting to walk in the area bounded by 5th and 9th Avenues and 34th and 42nd Streets feels the increased foot congestion acutely — at many times of day, there is literally very little room to move.

The conditions call for reversal of the long-term trend of widening streets to accommodate more cars. Pedestrian crowding has in fact long been a problem in Midtown — case studies undertaken over a decade ago by the Regional Plan Association showed that 78% of travelers on Midtown blocks were on foot, and that they were confined to such small spaces that **walking in the roadway** adjacent to traffic was commonplace.

Although the City DOT plans to widen sidewalks and calm traffic around Times Square this year, a twin of the department's Herald Square project (*MTR #287*), the city needs to look at the problem on a wider scale. NYC DOT should adopt pedestrian level-of-service standards for Midtown. Cars are forever **doomed to move at a crawl** in the central business district. Improving pedestrian mobility should be prioritized over service levels for Midtown car traffic.

Traffic Calming Works

An article in the Winter, 2001 *Transportation Quarterly* reviews data from before and after studies of traffic calming installations, and concludes that traffic calming measures **generally achieve their goals of reducing speeds, traffic volume and collisions.**

The review, by Surface Transportation Policy Project research director Reid Ewing, is part of the Institute for Transportation Engineers and FHWA effort to produce a "state of the practice" report on traffic calming.

The project has assembled a database of before and after traffic calming studies — it has large sample sizes for speed humps and tables, but less data on features like raised intersections.

Data used for the U.S. "state of the practice" report showed somewhat reduced traffic calming impacts than are found in similar international studies. Ewing suggests that European and British traffic calming treatments are more intensive, using measures in combination, where many American examples employ only one.

Brooklyn Traffic Calming Plan: Still Contested

Transportation Alternatives' Winter, 2001 magazine reports that Downtown Brooklyn **pilot traffic calming projects** are finally being implemented. But the organization warns that the projects' designs have been so **diluted** that community groups wonder whether they will have any impact on car speeds or through-traffic volumes.

Traffic calming in NYC has suffered from conflicting impulses among city transportation managers. The need to better protect pedestrians and neighborhood character from burgeoning traffic is obvious, yet a strong "car party" within the transportation bureaucracy seems clearly uncomfortable with the reversal of traditional traffic engineering that traffic calming represents. Thus, promising speed hump deployment has slowed down, and was criticized by former city Transportation Commissioner Wilbur Chapman (*MTR #245*).

The NYC DOT's Downtown Brooklyn traffic calming project has ridden the same waves, and has been a subject of controversy for years. Brooklyn civic leaders, elected officials and pedestrian advocates had to fight hard to keep the city from scuttling the project altogether (see *MTR #114*), and as recently as last summer, DOT officials said they hoped any traffic calming measures would affect traffic as little as possible (*MTR #269*).

T.A. says the projects the city is promoting in Brooklyn represent **only the mildest traffic calming measures**. For instance, raised crosswalk and intersection applications are only two inches high, as opposed to the international standard of four inches. DOT has also refused to install sidewalk-extending "neckdowns" at many of the intersections where they would be most effective. The Department also shies away from bollards at streetcorners, arguing that they could create problems for **"speeding motorists."**

Public meetings to discuss the pilot projects will be

held this spring. Contact Transportation Alternatives at **212-629-8080** or transalt.org for more information.

Downtown Brooklyn Traffic Calming Projects

- Curb extensions on Lafayette Ave. at Carlton Avenue and Adelphi Street, and at the intersection of Hicks Street and Atlantic Avenue.
- A raised intersection at Hicks Street and Pierrepont Street.
- A neckdown and raised crosswalk on South Oxford Street at Fulton Street.
- Widened median refuges on Tillary Street at Adams, and longer pedestrian signal phases.
- A pedestrian refuge on Atlantic Avenue at Bond Street, and neckdowns on Bond Street at Atlantic Ave.
- A colored bicycle lane on Henry Street south of Atlantic Avenue.
- A leading pedestrian interval at Atlantic Avenue and Clinton Street
- An exclusive pedestrian phase at Remsen Street and Court Street.

Amtrak Adding to Fast Fleet

Amtrak says it will add two new high-speed trainsets to its Northeast Corridor Acela Express service (bringing the total to three) on March 5. One of the trains will add a daily round-trip Boston-Washington run, while the other will enter NYC-Washington service, making the one-way trip in two hours, 28 minutes. New Amtrak schedules show high-speed trains leaving NYC for Boston at 8:03 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. Fast trains to Washington depart at 3:50 and 9:00 p.m.

Amtrak also says it will have its full complement of 20 high speed trains running in the Northeast Corridor by the end of summer.

New York Readies Faster Trains

Governor Pataki announced in February that Amtrak and NY State had conducted successful tests of refurbished diesel locomotives designed to be the fastest non-electric trains in the United States. Officials hope to begin putting the faster trains into service this spring on Amtrak's NY State Empire Corridor. Seven high speed trains are planned. Officials say the new models will shave 20 minutes from the New York City-Albany run and an hour from Buffalo-NYC trips. The locomotives can also run on electric power, which they will use in New York City and Penn Station.

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



MTR#307 Contributing: Janine Bauer, Adelma Lilliston, Lisa Schreiberman Editors: Jon Orcutt, Kristen Fountain Exec. Director, Janine Bauer

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

CALENDAR

March 8, Noon Long Island Rail Road Commuters Council meeting, 347 Madison Ave., 5th Fl. boardroom, Manhattan, 212-878-7087, www.lirrcc.org

March 14, 9am NJTransit Board meeting, One Penn Plaza East, Ninth Floor, Newark, NJ, 973-491-8800

March 15, 6pm NYC Transit / Lower East Side Business Improvement District public meeting on Manhattan Bridge-related subway service ("W" train) plan. 40 Division Street, Manhattan. 718-243-4321.

March 15, 7pm Inst. of Electrical and Electronics Engineers discussion of NJTransit CNG buses, present and future with NJ Natural Gas representative, Afton Restaurant, Hanover Rd. at Columbia Tpke, Florham Park, NJ, \$. 973-386-1156

March 16, 9:30am "Land Use, Transportation and the New Economy." University Transportation Research Center visiting scholar: Genevieve Giuliano. 1 World Trade Center, 43rd floor, Manhattan. 212-650-8050

March 19, 9:30am NYC Transit Committee of MTA Board will hear citizen testimony on Manhattan Bridge diversion/"W" train plan. 347 Madison Avenue, Manhattan. 718-243-4321.

April Conferences

April 10,11,&12 Transaction 2001, Tropicana Resort Hotel, Casino and Conference Center, Atlantic City, NJ, \$, 908-903-1077

April 23 NY Smart Growth Conference, Albany. Program in formation. Contact National Audubon Society of NY, 518-869-9731 or aheaphy@audubon.org

April 26, 6pm "Thinking Big Again: How to Implement Large Transportation Projects", multiple speakers, Cooper Union, Wolman Auditorium, 21E, 51 Astor Place, Manhattan, 845-634-7178.

April 27, 7:30am-1pm Regional Plan Association Regional Assembly: "Re-Engineering the Region's Centers." Grand Hyatt, Manhattan. 212-253-2727, www.rpa.org

The Tri-State Transportation Campaign Web Site

www.tstc.org