

Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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NEWS

Poll: CT Residents Fed Up with Traffic

A poll of 1,262 registered voters released last week by Quinnipiac University spotlighted public concern about transportation in Connecticut. Unsurprisingly, the poll — which surveyed residents of Fairfield, New Haven, and Hartford Counties — found that frustration over the state of traffic is heaviest in Fairfield. The poll reflects and reinforces the growing sense in the state that transportation policy and budget reform is urgently needed.

When asked to name the most important problem facing Connecticut, 10% said lack of quality mass transit, traffic, and poor road and highway infrastructure, putting transportation **close behind traditional top concerns** like taxes, education, and the economy. According to the *Stamford Advocate*, this is the first time that transportation has polled as such a major concern.

When asked about transportation directly, 62% overall said that **traffic in their communities** is a very or somewhat serious problem, while 90% said traffic on Connecticut's highways is a very or somewhat serious problem. Analyzed separately, 78% of Fairfield County participants said traffic was a serious problem in their communities and 94% said highway traffic is a serious problem. Thirty-nine percent of all respondents said they are **stuck in traffic jams** several times a week. Fifty-seven percent of Fairfield County residents said they experience jams several times weekly, 23% every day.

For many, desperation to reduce congestion overruled tax complaints. 42% of all respondents said they would be willing to **pay more in taxes** to reduce traffic. In Fairfield County, 49% said they would pay more.

CT House Speaker Moira Lyons told the *Advocate* she was heartened that residents expressed willingness to invest in transportation. Last month, she told Fairfield County business leaders that attacking congestion would likely require additional state funds and that she was concerned about public reaction (MTR #305).

RR Opens Second Front Against High Taxes

Although Gov. Pataki's proposed 2001-02 budget includes tax relief for freight railroads, which pay higher property taxes than other businesses, in February, **CSX filed a lawsuit** against NY State, NYC and ten other NY counties, municipalities and school districts. CSX says NY's tax rates restrain its investment in infrastructure that could capture freight business from trucks.

The suit tax rates in the state are unfair to railroads. It was filed in federal court in White Plains.

Parkway Debate Reaches New Low

Last week, front-runners in the 2001 New Jersey Governor's race, Acting Governor Donald DiFrancesco and Woodbridge Mayor Jim McGreevey, both told the *Star Ledger* they are looking into ways to **take tolls off the Garden State Parkway** for good. The removal of Parkway tolls has become a signature issue for dark-horse candidate **Bret Schundler**, the Jersey City Mayor who suggests the highway be maintained with resources from the state budget (MTR #305). The acceleration of anti-toll rhetoric has many observers concerned that candidates are putting politics before common sense.

The same article quoted State Assembly Transportation Chairman Alex DeCroce worrying that if tolls are "knocked off" the Parkway, "the highway is going to go to hell." Candidates would do well to listen to his warning. Saddling the state with the Parkway's \$620 million debt and a full plate of **unfunded capital needs** would leave NJ DOT less money for other projects and would mean fewer resources for the upkeep of the Parkway, an outcome unfavorable both to taxpayers and Parkway drivers (MTR #302).

City Candidates' Transport Views Emerging

New York City's four major mayoral candidates touched on a variety of transportation issues at a public forum sponsored by the Neighborhood Independent Democrats in Brooklyn's Carroll Gardens last Wednesday evening:

Bronx Borough President Fernando Ferrer made strong statements in favor of rail freight development to reduce truck impacts in the city, and called for Second Avenue subway construction.

The Borough President's position on Verrazano Bridge tolls is evolving. Where previously Ferrer had called for removal of the tolls (MTR #'s 306 and 305), last week he said that Staten Islanders' E-Z Passes should be adjusted so that they paid no tolls on the bridge. Out-of-borough drivers would still pay.

This proposal did not seem to satisfy audience members interested in the question, who are mainly concerned with the heavy NJ-based truck and other traffic that one-way Verrazano tolls attract to the Gowanus/lower Manhattan corridor. Ferrer's plan would provide no relief for that problem.

The Borough President based his no-tolls-for-Staten Islanders position on the premise that it is unfair that "Staten Islanders can't get off the Island without paying." However, Staten Islanders enjoy the only major

fare-free public transit service in NYC. The Staten Island Ferry accounts for over one quarter of daily trips from S.I. to other NYC boroughs. More importantly, most people traveling within the city are not driving. They use subways and buses, for which they pay fares.

Responding to a question about how to improve pedestrian safety in the city, **City Council Speaker Peter Vallone**, said that “if the city can’t get the job done, I’m open to what outside experts may have to offer.”

Public Advocate Mark Green indicated that he had met recently with the Gowanus Expressway Community Coalition. While he said that technical information was not yet available to allow him to fully endorse proposals to sink the Gowanus Expressway into a tunnel, Green said he “loved the idea” that removing the elevated highway would reconnect neighborhoods and free up valuable urban land. Green also acknowledged the importance of reducing truck impacts in city communities, and pledged to go beyond the city’s current “interim” waste export plan to a rail- and barge-based system.

City Comptroller Alan Hevesi acknowledged the debate over the fate of the Gowanus Expressway. He also endorsed implementation of what he called the “Jerry Nadler plan” for Brooklyn container port development supported by a cross-harbor rail freight tunnel. Hevesi specifically discussed a Staten Island-Brooklyn rail tunnel, which would connect to mainland rail lines via S.I.’s north shore and the Arthur Kill lift bridge.

Albany Quiet on Transit Front

The NY State Legislature is beginning to release elements of its response to Governor Pataki’s 2001-2002 budget proposal, but has said nothing so far about whether and to what extent it may **add resources to transportation capital budgets**. Last week, the State Senate released proposals on farm and nursing home aid, and both the Senate and Assembly have released parts of their respective plans for education.

Transit and highway capital programs agreed to in Albany last year face funding shortfalls from the failure of last fall’s transportation bond act. Governor Pataki’s proposal did not provide any money to fill the holes.

The Senate says the state will bring in about \$450 million more next year than Pataki’s budget estimates, and sees an even bigger surplus coming from this year’s budget. All told, the Senate thinks there is about \$1.24 billion more available for 2001-02. The Assembly says the number is even higher, at \$2.1 billion.

In comments to *Newsday* last month, MTA executive director Marc Shaw suggested that, with interest rates falling, the **MTA** could further **increase its borrowing** to cover about \$1 billion of the \$1.6 billion needed to fill out its \$17.1 billion capital program, leaving \$600 million to be made up by Albany during the life of the five year plan. The MTA plan’s heavy reliance on **bond refinancing** drew intense criticism as the plan was developed during 2000 (*MTR #265*).

PA Preparing for Price Plan

The Port Authority has indicated that it is interested in changing E-ZPass **monthly customer statements** to reflect payment of peak and off-peak toll rates under the congestion pricing plan pending implementation at its Hudson River and Staten Island bridges and tunnels. Statements that show the different rates should reinforce the off-peak incentives the pricing plan promotes. However, this change is likely to come after the **March 25** congestion pricing start date.

The Port Authority is also promoting the new toll plan with flyers, direct mail, advertising in newspapers and on radio, and highway signs.

The agency also says it is adding **fare vending machines** in many PATH stations that will allow credit and debit card QuickCard purchases. PATH is also setting up fare vending at other, non-station locations, and trying to better promote the fact that NJ Transit’s fare vending machines also sell PATH QuickCards.

Millstone Bypass’ New Process: Real Opening or NJDOT Charm Offensive ?

At a press conference last week, New Jersey Transportation Commissioner James Weinstein announced that the agency would take a “**fresh new look**” at solutions to traffic problems along Route 1 in the environmental impact statement for the Millstone Bypass planned for West Windsor Township’s Penns Neck area. But for now, local environmental groups and transportation watchdogs remain unconvinced.

In a preliminary environmental assessment released last year, NJDOT supported construction of a **four-lane, 2.3 mile bypass** — an elevated highway that would run through the Millstone River watershed and end near the historic Delaware and Raritan Canal (*MTR #291*). But the agency was forced to revisit the issue when, after vociferous local protest, Governor Whitman ordered a full environmental impact study to “ensure we are not creating more harm to the environment than we are trying to eliminate,” she said (*MTR #294*).

Commissioner Weinstein told reporters that the new process will be driven by public input and work with a wider set of transportation improvement goals. In the environmental assessment, the agency rejected any alternatives that did not allow removal of traffic lights from three intersections on Route 1. NJDOT reports that the new study will generate improvement alternatives through interviews with concerned groups and community forums. To this end, the agency has hired a **private outreach firm** and consultants from the Rutgers University Transportation Policy Institute and its Center for Negotiation and Conflict Resolution to facilitate public involvement.

Although welcoming greater involvement, citizen, environmental, and transportation groups opposed to bypass construction believe that these forums and “stakeholder meetings” are meager substitutes for a **formal reorientation** of the project through a **new**

public “scoping” hearing and rewriting official documents directing the study.

A public notice filed with the Federal Highway Administration states that NJDOT will “continue the scoping process begun during the preparation of the [environmental assessment] to evaluate alternatives already under review.” The notice leads concerned groups to believe that NJDOT is engaging conflict resolution specialists without making a commitment to formally “re-scope” the project.

NY Thruway’s Tappan Zee II P.R. Blitz

In February, the New York State Thruway Authority kicked off a drive to win public approval for replacement of the Tappan Zee Bridge with a press conference, a new website, and a public opinion poll that gave bridge replacement high marks. In response to a question weighing repair of the existing bridge versus “immediate replacement,” 66% of respondents from Westchester, Rockland, Orange and Bergen Counties said that the Tappan Zee should be replaced.

However, the Thruway’s efforts hit a roadblock last week when the head of the company that produced the poll, Zogby International, told the *Journal News* that he **regretted the way the question was phrased** and felt it was **unduly leading** towards replacement.

It would be hard for anyone to find the following “question,” three-quarters of which is a statement, objective: “The Governor’s I-287 Task Force says the cost to repair the bridge over the next 12 years is roughly equivalent to the cost of replacing the bridge. Many of the repairs would require closing lanes, with resulting congestion and delay. The results after 12 years of repairs would be a structure that could not support existing traffic patterns due to construction. Would you agree that the bridge should be repaired in stages over the next 12 years or be completely replaced?”

Beyond its central fiction that bridge replacement would occur “now” rather than after a decade of study and construction, the question also fails to explain why the existing bridge “could not support existing traffic patterns,” and how traffic patterns and levels are largely the result of specific policy and planning choices.

Municipal League Likely to Scrutinize TZII

County and municipal officials in the Lower Hudson Valley are considering formation of a local government coalition to counter-balance the weight of the NY State Thruway and Pataki Administration in the pending study of **replacing the Tappan Zee Bridge**.

One feature of the coalition might be a pooling of resources that could be used to hire technical and legal help during and after the lengthy study process. A number of Westchester municipalities are in favor of the coalition. Rockland County’s Legislative Transportation Committee voted to join the group last week — the full county legislature will consider the motion next week.

NYC’s Deadliest Avenues

The *New York Post* recently published a list of New York City’s deadliest streets. Here, we add perspective to the raw pedestrian and bicyclist fatality numbers by examining avenue length and neighborhood density:

Avenue	Bike/ped deaths, 1998-2000	Deaths/mile	Deaths/density
Northern Boulevard (Q)	20	1.74	0.00675
Queens Boulevard (Q)	18	2.41	0.00477
Atlantic Avenue (east of Flatbush to Queens) (Bk)	14	2.37	0.00262
Bruckner Boulevard (Bx)	13	1.69	0.00408
Flatbush Avenue (Bk)	13	1.24	0.00546
Ocean Parkway (Bk)	13	2.39	0.00204
Nostrand Avenue (Bk)	13	1.63	0.00152
Grand Concourse (Bx)	10	1.92	0.00097
Amsterdam Avenue (M)	12	1.75	0.00081
Hylan Boulevard (SI)	14	1.00	0.01323

(Density measure is residents/square mile in census tracts within one-quarter mile of the avenue — 1990 census figures).

Viewed this way, Queens Boulevard, Ocean Parkway and Atlantic Ave. have seen the greatest recent concentrations of fatalities, while Hylan Boulevard is outstanding for its high level of fatalities in a less densely populated setting. Combining the per mile and density measures (using a standard deviation method), **Queens Boulevard**, with very high deaths per mile and moderate to high fatalities relative to density, can fairly be called the most deadly street in New York City.

NYC: More Cameras to Track Motoring Mad-dogs

The NYC DOT plans to increase the total number of red-light cameras deployed in the city to 50 by June, a healthy boost to the 30 cameras currently at work on city streets. At least two of these will be installed on **Queens Boulevard** (the street already has two) in an attempt to decrease the carnage that has received so much attention recently.

Red-light cameras deter motorists from light running by photographing the license plates of violating cars and automatically ticketing the owner. As a result, **Transportation Alternatives** has determined that red-light running at the intersections equipped with the cameras decreases by 34%.

At least one Council Member Walter McCaffrey feels that four red-light cameras on Queens Boulevard are not enough. He was cited in the *Daily News* last week calling for 8-10, and for **speed radar** cameras to catch speeders.

Familiar Story: Bigger Buses, Fewer Buses

Staten Island and Brooklyn express bus riders are speaking out at **longer waits and more crowded buses** caused by NYC Transit's replacement of older buses with new, larger coaches. The MTA contends that the new buses serve the same number of people because they seat 57 rather than 40 people. Thus, the agency says it can reduce the number of buses on the road without bus capacity. The debate mirrors that seen on NYC Transit local routes where **big articulated buses** are replacing ordinary transit buses, with a reduction in frequency and agency claims that "seats" on the routes have not been eliminated (*MTR #259*).

Express bus riders say that on the old buses, they could stand. But on the new buses, passengers are not supposed to stand, and there are no poles hang onto. In fact, the over-the-road coaches being used have the least capacity of any bus in NYC Transit's fleet — only the 57 seated passengers are supposed to ride. Other buses' capacities range from 65 to 145 (the articulateds) with 32 to 62 seats.

Capacity issues aside, riders are angry that they have to wait longer for the bus as runs are cut back. Bay Ridge NYC Council member Marty Golden held a public hearing last week attended by more than 300 outraged bus riders. The X15, X14 in Staten Island and X27 in Brooklyn have all had schedule reductions of between 13% and 18%.

CT's Traffic Reduction Work Slogs Along

The *Associated Press* reported last week that CT DOT consultants expect to deliver the first phase of a mass **transit marketing study** for the I-95 corridor in coming months. The study is central to ConnDOT's plan to comply with the legislated mandate to reduce peak traffic in the I-95 Corridor by 5% within five years.

The results will arrive more than three years after ConnDOT submitted its proposal for reducing traffic along the Corridor to the legislature, and **less than two years** before the agency is **required to meet the reduction goal**. A two year progress report released last year showed ConnDOT failing to meet its benchmarks by almost 50% (*MTR #261*).

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



The Tri-State Transportation Campaign Web Site

www.tstc.org

MTR#308 Contributing: Lisa Schreibman Editor: 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 tstc@tstc.org

CALENDAR

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 B.I.D. 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.

March 23, Noon "The Green Port Path: Plans to Make NY/NJ the Major Hub of the East Coast." City Club of NY forum, with Frank McArdle, General Contractors Assn, Chris Ward, Port Authority, others. National Arts Club, Gramercy Park South, Manhattan. \$ 212-227-0129.

March 27, 6pm Auto-Free NY meeting. "Remembering John Lindsay - Champion for Auto-Free Space." Donald Elliot, former chair, NYC Planning Commission. 104 Washington Street, Manhattan. 212-475-3394.

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