

Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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NEWS

Congestion Worse Than Reported

A strong media theme from the early May release of the Texas Transportation Institute's annual study of U.S. traffic congestion was the New York region's relatively low ranking among the most clogged metro areas.

On May 9, for instance, the *NY Times* headlined: "In Study of Nation's Worst Traffic, New York Must Yield." The article stated: "Where the average resident of those metropolitan areas loses more than 50 hours a year to traffic delays, New Yorkers lose an average of 34 hours a year, the study found." That calculus put NY in 23rd place, behind the likes of Nashville and Austin.

But this **per person** result is clearly the result of the region's very high transit ridership. Analyst Charles Komanoff has recalculated the numbers on a **per driver** basis. Congestion per driver rankings propel NY/NJ to 5th place, tied with Boston and trailing only the big, traditional traffic disasters of LA, Seattle and Atlanta.

So drivers are right that congestion here is horrendous, even if one statistic says it's worse in Austin. On the other hand, the prevalence of non-drivers here means congestion is not **the problem for everyone** TV news, the tabloids and 1010 WINS make it out to be.

Then again, many besides drivers are impacted by the noise, pollution and physical presence of traffic congestion. Pedestrians, bicyclists, bus riders and city residents with traffic jams outside their windows all suffer from it. In their cases, though, the enemy is not some generic "us," as might be arguable in Nashville.

States New Locus of Cell Phone Debate

Last week, NY Gov. George Pataki proposed to **ban hand-held cell phone use** on while driving on **state highways**. Pataki's bill joins 12 others in Albany to restrict phoning while driving. NJ and CT legislatures have multiple bills pending, as do at least 20 other states.

Westchester and Suffolk Counties levy phoning while driving fines, as do several NJ towns. Nassau County and more NJ towns are considering regulations. NYC banned use of hand-held phones by taxi drivers in 1999, and a city-wide ban has been introduced in City Council.

Concern about driver phone use was prompted in part by a 1997 New England Journal of Medicine study that found phoning and driving **quadrupled the risk** of a crash and was almost as dangerous as drunk driving. Observers note that **hands-free phones** and other activities that divert driver attention could be equally conducive to accidents and are ignored in most legislation.

NYC Transit Cooks its Books

On Friday morning, New York City Transit officials held a briefing for reporters on their proposals to change the way they **grade their own service**.

The Straphangers Campaign charged that Transit's effort is not a sincere attempt to come up with better or simpler measures, but is instead an exercise in social promotion for transit managers.

Consider the one and only concrete example that Transit provided on Friday: For the M101 bus, the old measure of how regularly the bus arrived was 40%. Under the new measure, it shoots up to 75%. **Without adding a single bus**, or cracking down on cars parking at bus stops, or any other action to improve service, the M101's **service regularity improves dramatically**.

Transit officials withheld all other new and old statistics for the overall subway and bus system, for all 20 subway lines and another 41 bus routes. They also did not release statistics generated by their proposal for a more forgiving standard for "on-time performance."

NYC Transit floated the yardstick change last September, sparking a flurry of criticism (*MTR* #286). The most fundamental change mentioned then shifted the measure of on-time performance from adherence to a scheduled interval between trains or buses to a "wait assessment" that would classify anything arriving within three minutes of its scheduled arrival as on time. The new assessment method would mean that official service regularity performance for lines with short scheduled intervals will jump upward even if scheduled intervals are not met — the M101 numbers distributed Friday seem to bear this contention out. A chart provided by NYC Transit last fall showed that while the present system showed 80.7% of subway trains on-time during the second quarter of 2000, the **new measures would hike the rate** to 89.5%.

Last fall's proposal would also count early trains as on time, while the current system does not, adding further leeway to on-time performance. "It's like setting the scale to negative 10 and saying you've lost weight," said the Straphangers Campaign's Gene Russianoff.

Transit's original proposal called for rating train and station cleanliness at depots or before the morning peak, rather than during the course of daytime operation.

Transit advocates also expressed concern that adoption of the new system would wipe out the ability of NYC Transit or independent groups to make historical comparisons of service provision and performance.

Spano Postpones Tappan Zee Study Approval

Last week, Westchester County Executive Andrew Spano requested that the NY Metropolitan Transportation Council delay approval of the "Tappan Zee Bridge Alternatives Analysis," stating that he wanted more details on what the study would examine. The Council, which operates on a consensus basis, duly postponed the action.

In recent weeks, the Tri-State Transportation Campaign wrote to Spano and Rockland County Executive C. Scott Vanderhoef, urging them to **attach conditions** to the study before approving it at NYMTC.

Such conditions could include:

1. That any project will not include widening the Thruway, and may include a written agreement that the Thruway will **forego such widening** in the future.
2. No new bridge will be built without a **concurrent, funded mass transit** project.
3. A new bridge will not have any more than eight lanes of vehicular traffic.
4. Bridge structural issues, transit feasibility, **induced traffic** effects and **land use impacts** will be clearly examined in the alternatives review.
5. Restoration of West Shore rail passenger rail service will be supported and funded by the Metropolitan Transit Authority.

In requesting the delay, Spano's office took pains to state that it wasn't against the study going forward, but that the county executive wanted a clearer picture of what the study would cover. Westchester officials said Spano would meet with Thruway staff this week. Hopefully, Spano will also meet with **Metro-North and MTA officials**. The Thruway's prominent public profile on the Tappan Zee replacement issue, and the relative invisibility of top Metro-North and MTA officials adds to the perception that the transit talk associated with the project is window dressing for a highway initiative.

Both Spano and Vanderhoef underscored their commitments to a transit solution in comments to the *Journal-News*. A Spano spokesperson said, "He's not in favor of widening I-287." Vanderhoef reiterated earlier statements that he would not support a new crossing unless it included mass transit.

Bronx Distributor Will Use Clean Trucks

This week, Manhattan Beer Distributor announced it will be the first company in the Bronx to use compressed natural gas for heavy-duty trucks. Manhattan Beer will retrofit nine of its diesel trucks with CNG engines that will be fueled at the company's depot. Manhattan Beer expects its fueling station to be ready in 8-10 weeks.

In part, the decision to switch fuels was a result of a Bronx clean fuel forum last year. Various federal grants will support the switch. Congressman Jose Serrano, whose office has been working to encourage such moves, applauded the company.

DiFrancesco Offers Lame Duck Response to Highway Spending Concerns

Last week the *Trenton Times* reported on the Tri-State Transportation Campaign's contention that NJ DOT is violating the 2000 Transportation Trust Fund Renewal law. DOT refuses to allocate sufficient funds in its 2002 capital program and long-term planning document to meet the five-year bridge and pavement repair goals set by the legislature and governor last summer (*MTR* #'s 305, 307, 315, 316).

"The DOT and administration **sold the public** on spending more tax money on transportation by saying the new funds would be spent mainly on repairing local bridges and roads," Jennifer Jaroski, New Jersey coordinator for the Campaign told the *Times*. "Voters came out 2-to-1 in support of both the 1999 Bridge Bond Act and the 2000 Trust Fund renewal, but now the DOT isn't holding up its end of the deal" (see next article).

The Campaign met with staff for Acting Governor DiFrancesco earlier this month to draw attention to DOT's flouting of Trust Fund Law. The group warned that it is **prepared to go to court** to enforce the law if the capital program is not amended. In a sign that such action may prove necessary, a spokesman for DiFrancesco told the *Times* that, "**we support the DOT commissioner's budget** recommendation and feel it is in keeping with the trust fund renewal."

Fooled Again?

Another NJ Bridge Bond on the Table

On May 7th, Assembly Transportation Chair Alex DeCroce (R-Morris, Passaic) introduced a bill that would authorize \$250 million in **additional state bonding** for the repair of county and local bridges. As in the local and county component of the 1999 Statewide Transportation and Local Bridge Bond Act, money from the 2001 Local Bridge Bond would be made available as grants to county and municipal governments. The Transportation Committee heard comments on the bill today.

The **Tri-State Campaign will testify against the bill**, arguing the new bonding would bail the NJ Department of Transportation out of its commitment to spend more existing state funds on bridge repair. The bill states that substantial additional emergency funds must be made available because the cost of meeting statewide bridge repair needs "greatly exceed the monies that can be provided from regular State appropriations, the Transportation Trust Fund, the federal government, and local governments."

But DOT plans to reduce annual spending of Trust Fund money on bridge repair by half in FY 2002-2004 and federal earmarks are also reduced by tens of million (*MTR* #316).

The Tri-State Transportation Campaign Web Site

www.tstc.org

Even if approved by legislators this session, the 2001 Bridge Bond is likely to meet **voter suspicion** and opposition from environmental and transportation reform groups in November. With the 1999 bridge bond and the 2000 transportation trust fund renewal, voters have **already approved over \$3 billion in state debt** — in addition to \$500 million in additional gas and sales taxes — to fund Department of Transportation programs through 2004. Repairing at least half of the over 800 structurally deficient bridges state-wide is an enacted central spending goal for these funds, but in reality less than 1/10 (roughly \$350 million) is programmed for that purpose. **Editorial boards** have begun to respond to the problem, using terms like “voters duped,” “a betrayal of voters’ trust” and “an issue of trust.”

Transit Benefits Work

Evidence that the availability of transit benefits significantly increases employee transit use is mounting. The April 2001 survey conducted by Wirthlin Worldwide for Xylo, Inc. of 1,000 U.S. adults found:

Nationally, employees with commuter benefits are **twice as likely** to use modes other than solo motoring (29% vs. 14%) and eight times more likely to use transit (15% vs. 2%) as employees without. Overall, access to commuter benefits makes a **15% difference in the modal split**.

Unfortunately, employer provision of such benefits lags far behind employee demand. Of employees surveyed, **86% would like commuter benefits**, which they feel they are beneficial and useful, while only 17% have access to them.

One employer that has demonstrated leadership in this capacity is the federal government. Beginning in September 2000 all Executive Branch employees in the Capital district were offered **employer-paid Metrochek**, pursuant to Executive Order 13150. Preliminary data on new benefit recipients indicate approximately 11% diverted from single occupancy vehicles to transit, **removing 12,500 cars** from Washington, D.C. roads. Currently about a third of the 350,000 eligible employees take MetroChek.

In the Manhattan central business district, about 275,000 of 1.94 million employees, or **14%, receive the TransitChek benefit**, which allows them to save money on the purchase of Metrocards and other transit passes.

With more mass transportation options than any other metropolitan area, it is surprising that fewer New York employees receive TransitChek than the national average for commuter benefits. Commuter benefits are a no-brainer: employers and employees save money while easing frustrating commuters and improving air quality. These benefits should be part of standard employee compensation packages.

For information on TransitChek call 1-800-622-5000 or log onto www.transitcenter.com.

Pocket Guide to Planning on Long Island

After getting a look at the amazing material in NY State DOT’s latest dog-and-pony show for its “Long Island Transportation Plan to Manage Congestion 2000” (LITP), we thought civilians could use a hand with translation.

The story so far: The LITP plan calls for construction of 180 new highway lane-miles across Nassau and Suffolk Counties. 60 of the miles would be new HOV lanes (in a tribute to Orwell, DOT originally called them “bus lanes that admit carpools”). To keep up a mass transit veneer, DOT is promoting a new express bus system it says will use the HOV lanes. But the agency says nothing about funding it, how it will be set up institutionally, or how long after HOV lane construction the buses will be deployed. DOT is trying to further embellish the scheme by labeling it the “Long Island Rapid Commute” (LIRC) system and morphing good old buses into “Rapid Commute Vehicles” (RCVs).

Truth in acronyms: Next time you encounter a DOT official wielding jargon like he just walked out of a military trade show, here’s what you need to know:

LITP = Long Island Total Paving plan

LIRC = Long Island Road Construction system

RCV = Road Construction Veil

The “RCV” slide-show is on-line at www.litp2000.com. DOT has scheduled a dozen open houses in May and June to pitch the plan. At the **kick-off event in Huntington** last Thursday, two people showed up to talk things over with DOT staffers.

Civics Present Better Subway Re-route Plan

Civic leaders from Brooklyn and Queens met with officials from the Metropolitan Transportation Authority and NYC Transit last week to press for adoption of a community supported proposal to **maintain existing G- and F-train service** while still increasing **peak Manhattan-bound service** from Queens by 20%.

NYC Transit announced plans in December to permanently halve the G-line —cutting service to thirteen stations in Queens north of Court Street — as well as to re-route and reduce F-train service in order to accommodate the new Queens-Manhattan V-line and the opening of the recently completed 63rd Street subway tunnel under the East River (MTR #296). The agency had been scheduled to approve these changes at an NYC Transit committee meeting last Thursday, but has postponed the meeting and vote until May 24 in order to review the community proposal.

The community plan, developed by the Noble Street Block Association and the Queens Civic Congress, would revise Transit’s V-train proposal by maintaining existing G and R service, while routing **V-trains through the 63rd Street tunnel** and using the now-

dormant N/R express tracks under Broadway. F service would stay in the 53rd Street tunnel, maintaining **key transfers** at Queens Plaza and the Lexington Ave. line.

A possible sticking point is that the community proposal would require **additional rolling stock**: 17 more trains than the 110 currently used by the five lines during the AM peak and 13 more than the NYCT proposal. NYC Transit expects to receive 212 new subway cars over the next two years intended in large part to serve the 63rd Street tunnel improvements. Also, the 1,130 new subway cars slated for purchase under the MTA next five-year capital program will result in 150 additionally available IRT cars and 53 more IND cars. Re-routing plans are also expected to be on the agenda at the next MTA board meeting on May 30th where a final decision may be made.

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The virtual closure of **Grand Street Station** in Chinatown and other service changes resulting from the next phase of Manhattan Bridge repair are not on the agenda for NYC Transit's May 24th meeting. NYC Transit is not required to hold hearings or a committee or board vote on these changes because they are not permanent, even though repair is expected to last at least four years (MTR #311, 314).

The Grand Coalition, a well-organized alliance of Chinatown and Sunset Park civic groups, is demanding **supplementary bus and subway services** to lessen the economic and community impact of the station closure. Specifically, the coalition has asked for 24-hour M line service along the B line in Brooklyn into Manhattan and improvements to the M Bowery station that would make it safe and accessible at all times and increased bus service on the B51 and other express routes between the two boroughs. Also, they want the planned 6th Avenue line shuttle service between Grand St. and Broadway-Lafayette expanded to W. 4th St. or 34th St. where many Chinatown residents are employed.

The Coalition has gained allies in Public Advocate and mayoral candidate **Mark Green** and City Councilwoman and public advocate candidate **Kathryn Freed**. However, although NYC Transit has agreed to requests to run shuttle buses between the Grand Street and Canal Street stations in Chinatown and is considering additional bus shuttle service stops throughout the neighborhood and lower East Side, the agency has remained cool to the coalition's central requests.

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



Mobilizing the Region

MTR#318 Contributing: C. Komanoff, A. Lilliston, G. Russianoff, L. Schreiberman Editors: J. Orcutt, K. 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

May 22, 8:30-10am Citizens Housing & Planning Council breakfast talk, former PA of NY&NJ chief economist, Rosemary Scanlon compares transportation concerns of NYC and London, 50 E. 42nd St., Suite 407, Manhattan, 212-286-9211

May 22, 6-8pm Auto Free New York Meeting, "Transit Riders' Bill of Rights," William R. Wright, Secretary NJ Association of Rail Passengers, 104 Washington St., Manhattan, 212-475-3394.

May 23, 1-5pm NYC Bar Association/Transportation Research Forum conference, "Traffic Congestion in the Region: From Standstill to Smooth Sailing," 42 W. 44th Street, www.abcny.org

May 23, 6-8pm CT Metro-North Shore Line East Rail Commuter Council sponsored "Commuters: Speak Out" opportunity to meet agency, political reps on transport concerns, Bridgeport Railroad Station, ?'s www.trainweb.org/ct

May 24, 11am-2pm New Jersey Dept. Law and Public Safety "Walk Safe NJ" campaign kick-off, Riverfront Stadium, Newark, 609-633-9022

May 24, Noon NYC Transit Riders Council monthly meeting. 347 Madison Ave., 5th floor, Manhattan. 212-878-7087.

May 29, 1pm NJTPA Board Meeting, NJTPA Headquarters, One Newark Center, 17th Fl., Newark, NJ 973-639-8406

June 2-9 Trenton Bike Week: cycling tours and races, bicycle riding, ownership + maintenance classes, cycle to work day, etc., trentoncycling@aol.com, www.pagespider.com/tcr

June 6, 4:30pm MTA public hearing on 2001-2002 federal funding request. 347 Madison Ave., Manhattan, 5th floor. Registration to speak closes at 6pm. To register, call 212-878-7483.

June 7, 1pm "Ca\$h for Tra\$h", Women's City Club lecture w/ NYS DOS Deputy for Long-Term Export, Marsha Hirst, 105 E 22nd Street, Manhattan, \$, 212-353-8070 or info@wccny.org

June 9 Mid Atlantic Regional East Coast Greenway Association Meeting, Wilmington, Delaware, RSVP dave.lutz@treebranch.com

June 7-10 9th Annual Congress for New Urbanism. New York City. Registration info, 800-788-7077, www.cnu.org

Find additional calendar entries at www.tstc.org