

Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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NEWS

Business, Transit Groups Challenge NYC Candidates

Last week, mass transit, business, environmental and civic groups, joined by five former top city transportation officials, called on **NYC mayoral candidates** to back a **comprehensive plan** to improve transportation in New York City.

The plan — “**Unclogging New York**” — urges the next mayor to aggressively attack New York’s nightmarish transportation problems by:

1. Winning real progress on **major projects** such as the Second Avenue Subway and the LIRR-Grand Central link, pushing a “fix-it-first” policy for roads and bridges and challenging the state to give NYC its rightful share of transportation aid.
2. Pressing for more, faster, less crowded **transit** by demanding a maximum 4-minute rush-hour wait on all subway lines and a seat for every rider off-peak.
3. Improving the **quality of life and safety** on our streets by cracking down on speeders and other dangerous drivers and widening overcrowded sidewalks.
4. Implementing **congestion pricing** to encourage off-peak trips and reduce congestion; and
5. Requiring city officials to **use transit** regularly and **slashing** the number of unnecessary government employee **parking permits**.

The plan was backed by past **NYC transportation commissioners** including Elliot Sander, Lucius Riccio, Ross Sandler and Constantine Sidamon-Eristoff. “Gridlock” Sam Schwarz, DOT deputy commissioner during the Koch years, also endorsed the platform.

The **Mark Green** campaign was quick to announce its support for the plan. Last Friday, an official at **Michael Bloomberg’s** campaign told *MTR* that the “Unclogging” plan was a “good blueprint” that Bloomberg was “very supportive of.” **Alan Hevesi** said he could not “make specific financial commitments” at this time, but endorsed the 2nd Ave. Subway. Other mayoral campaigns did not offer substantive comments in response to calls.

Groups backing the plan ranged from the Straphangers Campaign to the General Contractors Association. The full “Unclogging” plan is available on-line at www.straphangers.org.

Franks Details Transportation Agenda

Last week, former Congressman and gubernatorial candidate Bob Franks released a transportation agenda and sparred over transportation issues in a televised debate with his rival in this month’s Republican primary, Jersey City Mayor Bret Schundler.

In the debate and the agenda paper, Franks committed himself to removing the barrier toll booths from the Garden State Parkway within 90 days of becoming Governor, either through eliminating tolls or by replacing the current system with technology to read E-ZPass tags at normal highway speeds. In the debate, he suggested that toll elimination may “not be possible” and was enthusiastic about high-speed toll collection. He said in a recently faxed update, “I am committed to working with state officials to eliminate the Parkway’s barrier tolls in an effective and cost-efficient manner.”

Other positions in his policy paper are:

- Full funding for the Transportation Trust Fund. Franks promised he would not allow the diversion of transportation funds. Acting Governor DiFrancesco’s budget currently siphons off \$90 million from the Transportation Trust Fund for the general fund.
- Expanded parking lots and jitney services at commuter rail stations.
- More bi-level train cars for NJTransit.
- Trans-Hudson rail tunnel as a top construction priority
- Support for new commuter rail service on the West Trenton Line, the Monmouth-Ocean-Middlesex line, and the Lackawanna Cut-off.
- Modernize and improve bus fleets and expand routes.
- Expand cross-Hudson ferry service.
- Appointment of a commission to resolve congestion on Route 55 in the NJ Pinelands.
- Support for deep channel dredging at the NY/NJ port.
- Replace motor vehicle tailpipe testing with an on-board diagnostic test.

New Urbanists Plot Fight Against Sprawl

Opening the annual Congress for the New Urbanism Thursday evening in Manhattan, Maryland Governor Parris Glendening outlined his state’s efforts in what he called a critical national issue and the number one priority for states across the country — “fighting against unplanned or poorly planned development.”

Glendening declared that preserving and improving the quality of life is a key issue of economic survival

and development in information-based economies.

The Governor's presentation showed the massive leap in land consumption that occurred in Maryland during the 1980s. Prior to the 1960s, development was confined closely to the immediate metropolitan regions of Baltimore and Washington, D.C. He said that the 1980s-1990s growth patterns were "devastating — destroying the beauty of our state and increasing the tax burden."

Glendening called smart growth an essentially conservative idea that saves money, reduces waste and promotes community values. He outlined a variety of state policy and budget moves that he said have led Maryland to the point where it is now preserving more farmland and open space than is being lost to development each year. Local aid programs foster zoning changes promoting more traditional town and neighborhood design. New tax credits and state investment in rail and bus service are increasing transit's share of commuting. Glendening has also set up a new Institute for Smart Growth Research at the University of MD at College Park.

In closing, the Governor said the federal government must become a key partner in efforts to strengthen centers and stop sprawl. Federal facilities like post offices and courthouse should be cited according to smart accessibility criteria, while federal aid must shift from its still-overwhelming emphasis on highways to provide far more support for transit. Glendening said federal investments and policies were important forces in driving sprawl during the post-war period, and would be necessary to reverse the trend and help states and localities build better communities and transportation systems.

The Congress for the New Urbanism is a national coalition of architects, planners and community activists advocating more human-scaled planning and design of the built infrastructure. Its charter states that the Congress "views disinvestment in central cities, the spread of placeless sprawl, increasing separation by race and income, environmental deterioration, loss of agricultural lands and wilderness, and the erosion of society's built heritage as one interrelated community-building challenge." Last week's conference in NYC, the Congress' 9th annual gathering, drew about 1,000 attendees. The Congress' transportation task force has published a variety of "tech sheets" on-line and is working on a new urbanist street design manual. See www.cnu.org

The Tri-State Transportation Campaign on-line:

www.tstc.org

Meanwhile in Staten Island...

NY State DOT recently opened a new highway ramp off of the West Shore Expressway that Maryland's smart growth policies would have prohibited state expenditure for. The ramp is to underpin a variety of commercial developments on NYC's final frontier — the wholly car dependent west side of Staten Island.

NYC DOT Re-Shapes Truck Study

In a May 29th letter, NYC transportation commissioner Weinshall stated that the truck route project first conceived by the NYC DOT in 1999 (*MTR #215*) has been substantially reworked in response to community and elected official concerns.

Originally, the study of truck routes was designed to move trucks faster and thus qualify the project for U.S. "Congestion Mitigation/Air Quality" funds. Noting that speeding trucks would likely result in more accidents and inappropriate routing, community groups asked that the study be changed to emphasize safety and reduced community truck impacts.

The new study will focus on "coordinating engineering, educational, informational and enforcement efforts so that trucks remain on designated truck routes...and do not inappropriately utilize 'community streets.'" The letter states that the department will consider traffic calming to reinforce truck routes and that there will be greater community outreach than conceived under the original study.

The project will use safety funds from the federal Surface Transportation Program. The new RFP will come out during the summer and a consultant will be chosen in early fall. The Department expects work to begin in spring 2002.

Jersey City Vote is Likely Demise of Bergen Arches Highway

Last Tuesday, Jersey City residents elected former City Council President Glenn Cunningham as their next mayor, presenting him with a 53% to 46% victory over the current Council President, Tom DeGise. Both men said in debates held prior to the election that they supported using the abandoned Bergen Arches rail cut right-of-way for a commuter or light rail line, rather than a new expressway, a project championed by outgoing Mayor Bret Schundler (*MTR #319*). Cunningham may have even less reason than DeGise to pursue the highway proposal as his power base are neighborhoods that would suffer the health and safety impacts of additional truck and auto traffic.

Focus group meetings for an NJ DOT major investment study last month revealed close to unanimous opposition to a Bergen Arches Expressway. The study will also consider commuter and freight rail use for the cut out.

CT Strategy Board in Limbo with Budget Vote On Hold

The Connecticut Legislature adjourned last Thursday after budget negotiations broke down between its Democratic leaders and Republican Governor John Rowland. Although the parties will meet for further negotiations this week, the full legislature is not expected to reconvene in special session for a budget vote until June 18th at the earliest. One of the many bills left unattended during the final days of gridlock is the proposal to establish a Transportation Strategy Board. Pending legislation charges the board with developing a ten-year transportation improvement plan, carves the state into "Transportation Investment Areas," and allots \$50 million of 2001 budget surplus for near-term transportation projects (MTR #304).

A Transportation Strategy Board bill stripped of the \$50 million provision was approved by the Assembly last Tuesday, but was never raised for consideration in the Senate. However, legislators expect the Senate to eventually adopt the Assembly bill in some form and to allocate at least a portion of the \$50 million as part of its budget resolution.

The Assembly bill does not ensure environmental, transit, and labor representation on the Strategy Board, or give the Board a substantive role in formulating the Department of Transportation budget. It does, however, make some provision for hiring board staff and gives the board access to staff at DOT and the Economic Development Corporation. Representative John Harkins of Stratford told the *Associated Press*, "We need to make sure this doesn't become just another level of bureaucracy." But some advocates have been skeptical that established branches of government would ever cede power such as budget-making to anything resembling the Transportation Strategy Board.

Other promising transportation bills were left to founder in the Transportation and Appropriations Committee this session, including bills that would have established a Local Safe Streets and Traffic Calming program (MTR #303), directed government offices and business with more than 25 employees to begin offering the Federal transit benefit (Deduct-A-Ride), and appropriated funds to establish commuter rail between Hartford and New Haven.

Bill with such targeted, definable, and achievable goals may have been a more effective way to capitalize on the "fix transportation" energy stirring in Connecticut than six months of quibbling over an advisory board. Legislators should be aware that interest in better transportation will not disappear with the establishment of the Strategy Board, and the public will grow restive unless visible improvement start to be implemented.

Amtrak Shows Signs of Trouble

Amtrak appears to be backing out of a 1998 deal with New York State to upgrade track and locomotives in the Buffalo-NYC Empire corridor (MTR #191). According to the *Times Union*, Amtrak has told the state it cannot make a firm financial commitment to or name a completion date for a \$15 million track project between Albany and Schenectady.

The Pataki Administration hopes to run 125mph trains between Albany and NYC. Refitted locomotives for the run are scheduled to enter service this summer, but track work permitting top speeds hasn't started. NYS DOT appears willing forward the project itself. The *Times Union* reported in April that the program was significantly behind schedule.

Other warning signs from Amtrak were in abundance last week. The railroad received permission from the U.S. DOT to mortgage part of Penn Station NY for a \$300 million loan Amtrak says it needs to bolster its operating budget from now to September. Amtrak officials blamed their budget crunch on late delivery of Acela Express trains for high speed Washington-Boston service, but did not explain. Amtrak is entitled to charge penalties for late delivery.

Observers were surprised at the timing, since Amtrak usually has strong spring cash flows from advance summer ticket sales. They said the present situation seems far worse than earlier Amtrak budget squeezes. Revenues have been rising, but expenses are rising faster, some say due to capital project cost overruns and significant unforeseen overtime costs.

It's unclear yet whether an Amtrak budget crisis would bring rail service issues to a head in Congress. On one hand, Amtrak is supposed to implement a full schedule of Northeast Corridor trains this summer and ridership has grown during the past several years. Moreover, highway and airport congestion cry out for development of travel alternatives. On the other, the railroad remains fundamentally under-funded, and its claims of better service are often at odds with the experiences of actual train riders. Congress has a variety of perspectives, from critics of any spending on rail and critics of Amtrak as an institution to supporters of a bill to invest \$10 billion in new high speed rail lines in urban corridors around the country.

Last month, Amtrak president George Warrington called on Congress to make up its mind about the railroad's mission: should it be a profitable business or a public service? Congress' insistence that the railroad achieve a profitable operating budget and operate a national passenger rail network is contradictory. U.S. commuter railroads and rapid transit systems, and successful inter-city train systems elsewhere all receive operating subsidies.

Even short of resolving the bigger issues, Congress and the states must take care to ward off any major

reduction of Amtrak service, especially in the north-east where Amtrak trains make strong contributions to congestion reduction (Amtrak's share of the Washington-NYC air/rail market is 70%).

Last weekend, Amtrak announced the indefinite suspension of Vermonter service due to track deterioration (on a line owned by the New England Central RR). That, and Amtrak's inability to move forward with planned infrastructure improvements in NY State are clear warning signs that a stronger commitment to inter-city rail service is desperately needed.

2001: an Info Odyssey

Imagine the plight of the transportation planner asked to analyze an agency's proposal for new bus routes. She decides that as background, she should map some basic information – population, major business locations, existing bus and subway routes and stops, street/highway capacity and use, and anticipated capital projects that might affect routes.

If she were in Florida, she would merely have to download transit software developed by the state's DOT. It provides information about transit throughout the state including roadway capacity, traffic signal delay, average travel times, frequency of service, number of residents and jobs located along transit lines. The software is free and advertised widely (www.dot.state.fl.us/Transit/transitlos/TLOS.HTM).

For capital program information, she wishes she was in Ohio where the State DOT website contains all of the agency's construction projects on an interactive map. The map shows the location of project sites, clicking on any site allows the user to see the scope of the project, the start and end dates and any traffic diversions (www.dot.state.oh.us/intercon/).

But she isn't in Florida or Ohio, she is in NYC. After confirming that NYCTransit uses GIS software to plan bus routes, she calls to get data. She is informed that she will have to purchase it through the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's store. The MTA store informs her that only hard-copies of maps are available, not data sets.

On she goes to the federal Bureau of Transportation Statistics which provides GIS data for all railways. This still leaves a big hole in her project – rail lines do not include subway stops, and there are no bus lines or use data (www.bts.gov/gis/ntatlas/).

Thinking she will eventually get around this obstacle, she looks for construction project data. She finds that NYS DOT provides a list of construction sites with little geographical information. The first description of a project in NYC confounds her: "D258058 Rehabilitation of 14 Bridges at Various Locations."

CALENDAR

June 12, 6-8pm LaGuardia subway access citizens advisory committee meeting. Crystal Palace, 31-09 Broadway, Astoria. Queens, 212-490-9090.

June 13, 7-9pm NYC Conservation Challenge panel, "Deadly Urban Air: How do we turn back the growing asthma epidemic," Columbia University Student Center, 2920 Broadway, Roone Arledge Cinema, www.nycef.org 212-361-6350, x 202

June 12, 14, 18, & 21, 4-8pm NJ DOT and NJTransit public meetings on state-wide long-range transportation plan: Trenton, Hackensack, Egg Harbor, & Newark, see www.njchoices.com for locations and information

June 12, 13, & 14, 7-9pm NYMTC Public Planning workshops for 2002 Regional Transportation Plan: Staten Island, Rockland County, and Queens, for locations & ?'s www.nymtc.org/calendar.html 212.938.3319

June 19, 2pm NYC Dept. of City Planning Review of NYC Draft Transportation Improvement Plan (TIP), 22 Reade St., Spector Hall, 212.720.3300

June 20, 4pm Mid-Hudson South TCC Public Meeting on Draft Transportation Improvement Plan listings, 148 Martine Avenue, Rm 527, White Plains, ?'s 845-431-7930

June 20, 7:30pm Monthly meeting of the CT Metro-North Shore Line East Rail Commuter Council, SACIA, 1 Landmark Square, Stamford. www.trainweb.org/ct, 203-655-0138.

June 25, 26, & 27, 7-9pm NYMTC Public Planning workshops for 2002 Regional Transportation Plan: Upper Manhattan, The Bronx, and Queens/Brooklyn border, for locations & ?'s www.nymtc.org/calendar.html 212.938.3319

June 26, 8-9:30am Crain's NY breakfast with new Port Authority Executive Director Neil Levin, \$, pre-reg, <http://www.craainsny.com/calendar.cms>

June 28, 10am South Western Regional Planning Agency, Transportation Technical Advisory Group meeting, 888 Washington Boulevard, 3rd Floor, Stamford, CT, ?'s 203-316-5190, www.swrpa.org

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



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