

Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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NEWS

Garden State Parkway Backs Variable Tolls

At a board meeting last Thursday, the NJ Highway Authority's commissioners voted in favor of beginning peak and off-peak **toll discounts** for E-ZPass users, making the Garden State Parkway the third major New Jersey toll authority to implement **congestion pricing** within the last two years. Time-varied tolls were approved by the NJ Turnpike Commissioners in January 2000 and went into effect in September 2000 (*MTR* #'s 254, 286). Variable pricing was proposed for the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey's bridges and tunnels in November 2000 and began on the crossings in March 2001 (*MTR* #'s 295, 310).

The Parkway's pricing structure is more modest than that adopted by the two other agencies. Under the Parkway's program, cash payers will pay 35 cents at each of the 11 barrier plazas at all times. E-ZPass users will pay 33 cents during peak hours and 30 cents off-peak. Peak hours are 7-9am, 4-6pm weekdays, 10-2pm Saturdays and 3-7pm on Sundays. The differential would become more dramatic if the next Governor and state legislature choose to install **staggered high-speed toll facilities**, as suggested by Acting Governor DiFrancesco in a recent report (*MTR* #329).

Simultaneously, the Authority voted to discontinue token sales. Currently, Parkway patrons receive a small discount for purchasing rolls of tokens and no discount for using E-ZPass, a strategy that has left E-ZPass market share on the Parkway lagging at 48%. Used by roughly 11% of Parkway drivers, tokens will continue to be accepted at cash or exact change lanes.

A public hearing on the new toll structure is scheduled October 3rd at the PNC Bank Arts Center in Holmdel. After the hearing, Highway Authority commissioners will take a final vote. If approved, the toll changes will take effect January 1st. E-ZPass should be usable on all Parkway lanes by October 31.

Because the Authority will lower, not raise tolls to create the discounts, its congestion pricing system will cost the Parkway roughly \$12.5 million annually, an amount likely to strain its tight budget.

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The Highway System: Finished?

At the ribbon-cutting for a new stretch of the Foothills Freeway in the Los Angeles area last week, California Governor Gray Davis declared that, once finished, the Foothills would be the state's last freeway. No new highways are in the planning pipeline, according to the *NY Times*, and future transportation investment by the state will emphasize mass transit.

The governor's statement appears to refer only to **new alignment** highways. Within the "no new highways" policy, it's likely CalTrans (the Calif. state DOT) will pursue highway widening projects, bypasses and the like. Local and regional governments may also build new roads on their own. On the other hand, at least in the San Francisco Bay area, public sentiment appears to favor **highway removal** more strongly than highway construction.

But compare the California policy to New Jersey and Connecticut. In Jersey, the state continues to pursue construction of Routes 92 and 55 — new highways with huge sprawl, traffic generation and environmental consequences. **Route 92** would cut through the last large open space in otherwise densely developed Middlesex County. **Route 55** would create a new route from Philadelphia to Cape May beaches, slicing through state parks, a wildlife refuge and long stretches of pine barrens.

In Connecticut, the state seems determined to pave the way for sprawl throughout the eastern half of the state. ConnDOT's plan for **Route 6** — a new expressway running from Hartford toward Providence — would require a huge wetlands fill. It is opposed by towns and has been rejected by the U.S. EPA, but ConnDOT and Governor Rowland continue to push it. The agency's **Route 11** project would also slice through open land to create a new route from Hartford to the East Lyme area.

Declaring the highway network finished could represent a milestone in charting a new approach to transportation. Schaller Consulting's recent report on **transport mode choice in NYC** showed that a shift in public investment from highways to transit helped reverse a long trend where growth in car use outpaced increasing transit ridership (*MTR* #329).

On the other hand, **highway widening programs**

— as distinct from altogether new roads — in suburban areas with developed road networks can still deepen the cycle of sprawl and car dependence. For instance, NY State DOT continues to push its plan to **widen most major highways on Long Island**. If implemented, the plan will be a disaster. A combination of new land use policies, transportation demand management programs and greater state investment in transit and bike and pedestrian projects would be far more promising.

The Pataki administration has significant urban transit improvements to its credit, but Governor Pataki has yet to embark on a pro-active path to address the transportation-sprawl nexus, as Maryland's Parris Glendening (see *MTR* #321), and now possibly California's Davis, have done.

Facing Albany Roadblock, NYC Must Fake Traffic Safety Program

Frustrated by the inaction of the NY State legislature on a bill to allow expansion of NYC's modest **red-light camera program**, the NYC Dept. of Transportation is likely to install **dummy camera boxes** at 200 intersections, the *NY Post* reported last week. The cameras would look exactly like the 50 red light cameras in operation around the city. The cameras photograph license plates of motorists who drive through red lights. Because they will not facilitate the issuance of traffic tickets, the decoy cameras do not require state legislative approval.

Although willing to approve a bill that lets drivers turn right on red in Staten Island over the objections of Mayor Giuliani, the NYPD, NYC DOT and safety advocates, the legislature has balked at expanding the highly effective light camera program and starting a new **speed camera program** (*MTR* #330). In particular, Assembly Transportation Committee Chair **David Gannt** (Rochester) has voiced concerns over the encroachment of cameras on civil rights and police jobs. Advocates wonder why **Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver**, who hails from Manhattan, has not reminded Gannt that drivers do not have the right to break the law, and that NYC pedestrian deaths and injuries remain far too high.

Red light and speed cameras have proven records boosting traffic law compliance. The *Daily News* reported last week that additional red light cameras installed last January along Queens Boulevard — a roadway notorious for its 72 pedestrian deaths over the last 7 years — have yielded a **54% reduction in red light violations** there. 11,000 violations recorded in the last 6 months of 2000 shrank to 5,000 in the first six months of 2001. The British Medical Journal has reported that speed cameras in London produced a 60% reduction in deaths on the M25, one of the city's busiest highways.

Albany's Gridlock Felt Elsewhere

Westchester County Executive Andrew Spano said the "bare bones" budget passed by the state legislature earlier this month would trigger a **Bee Line bus fare increase** of 35 cents, to \$1.75, if transit aid is not increased in a supplementary budget. Spano called on Gov. Pataki to call a special legislative session to head off big cuts in state aid and government services.

The Pataki administration has called attention to the loss of mass transit funding in the sparse budget. Also because of the budget delay, CSX Corp. is preventing NY State from beginning work to upgrade Hudson Line tracks between Poughkeepsie and Albany. The bare bones budget omitted a sweeping **reduction of railroad property taxes** that state leaders agreed to earlier this year. CSX doesn't want the value of the tracks increased until property taxes go down. The work would speed Amtrak trains between Albany and NYC — the plan is to reduce the trip to two hours flat.

Pataki has met with legislative leaders to negotiate budget issues several times this week, impelled by municipalities' need to send out school tax bills and a Sept. 15 deadline for the expiry of "reauthorizations" — billions of dollars in unspent funds held over from previous budgets.

Nassau Bus Riders Continue to Grow But Will Gov't Abandon Them?

Long Island Bus announced in August that it was again breaking ridership records. "The average weekday ridership in June 2001 was 108,100," the highest for any June since the beginning of Long Island Bus in 1973," Neil Yellin, the agency president, said in a release.

On July 16, Long Island Bus reached a daily record of 110,365 customers. Sunday and Saturday rider records were also set July 15 and July 21.

Ridership may surge past these levels this fall, since summer is generally a time of slower rather than higher transit demand.

Candidates to succeed Thomas Gulotta as Nassau county executive have **pledged stronger support** from the county for mass transit. However, Gulotta and the county legislature will pass their 2002 budget this fall, before the new government takes office. The multi-year plan that Gulotta and the legislature developed during 2000 called for **zeroing out county support** for LI Bus this year. If they stick with the plan, another crisis season for Nassau's steadily increasing bus riding population may be upon us. Earlier this year, state legislative leaders like Senate Deputy Majority Leader Dean Skelos warned that Albany would not come to Long Island Bus' rescue every year.

A Plan to Rescue Staten Island Transit

On Tuesday, the Tri-State Campaign and Straphangers Campaign released a five-point plan — “An End to Commuter Chaos” — to alleviate the problems caused by Academy Corp.’s **withdrawal of express bus service** from Staten Island’s north and south shores, and by NYC Transit’s failure to keep up with express bus rider demand.

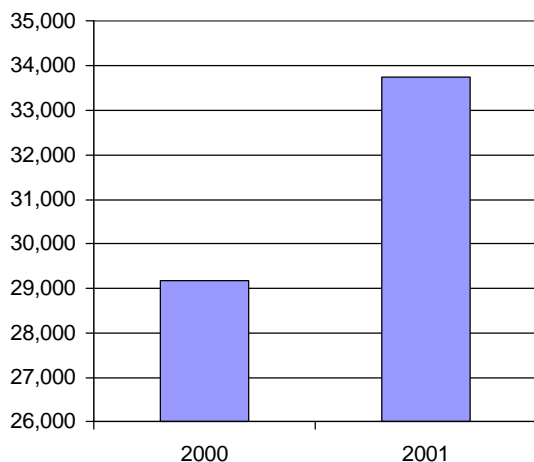
The plan urges NYC Transit to:

- Increase S.I. express bus service by 20%.
- Provide additional south shore service to make up for the loss of Academy service there.
- Add service on lines like the X10, X12 and X14, and split them into dedicated Lower Manhattan and Midtown services.
- Speed bus service along the Gowanus Expressway by implementing a three-per-car or bus-only rule for the HOV lane.
- Increase Staten Islanders’ travel options to by providing direct bus service to the Hudson-Bergen light rail terminal in Bayonne.

In “Chaos,” the groups point out that even before the collapse of Academy service, Staten Island NYC Transit express bus use was the **fastest growing segment of bus ridership in New York City**. A big part of the Academy crisis was that NYC Transit rush hour service was already over-crowded.

The paper recommends that NYC Transit make a stronger effort to keep up with growing ridership, and provide enough service to meet most express bus demand on Staten Island. The **Academy disaster** starkly **illustrated the pitfalls** of trying to maintain a hybrid public/private system with public funds. The plan to provide more Staten Island bus service resulted instead in less service overall.

In January, an agreement worked out between legislators, the city and Governor Pataki provided four new south shore bus routes, due to start at the end of August. However, with Academy’s pull-out



NYC Transit Staten Island express bus ridership, April 2000-April 2001

the south shore’s net gain is only two new routes.

One benefit of a larger NYC Transit fleet would be the potential to offer more dedicated Midtown and Lower Manhattan services. **NYC Transit’s surprise announcement** last week that it would begin a new **X30 route** from the north shore to midtown via the NJ Turnpike is a step in the right direction, but many of NYC Transit’s Midtown-destined riders will still have to make the torturous trip along the Gowanus and up from the tip of Manhattan along car-clogged city streets.

The plan’s final recommendations are common-sense measures that many public officials endorsed some time ago: speed buses along the Gowanus by tightening the access rules to the Gowanus HOV lane and provide a bus link to the light rail terminal in Bayonne. Governor Pataki has the power to cut through the bureaucratic excuses that crop up whenever these measures are raised. The paper calls on him to implement these improvements.

The paper is available on the internet at ww.tstc.org

Token Booths Stay Open For Now, Says Judge

In response to a lawsuit, a NY Supreme Court judge issued a temporary restraining order against NYC Transit last Tuesday, blocking the agency’s plans to close 35 part-time token booths and reduce hours at 87 others while she considers the case. The majority of the closures were otherwise scheduled to go into effect this week. The judge told the parties she would rule in the near future.

The lawsuit was brought by a coalition of groups including the Straphangers Campaign, Transport Workers Local 100 and State Senator Eric Schneiderman. It says NYC Transit is breaking the law by closing booths and reducing hours without public hearings (*MTR* #329). The law requires the agency to hold hearings prior to “any complete or partial closing of a passenger station.” The coalition has argued that removing booth attendants from lesser-used entrances will decrease safety for passengers and effectively close them to riders with disabilities.

NYC Transit says its plans are “fully supported by the law.” Transit argues that the majority of booths slated for closure are now open only during rush hours and that it would staff the stations with “customer service” personnel. But in testimony to the City Council in July, the Straphangers Campaign echoed the sentiments of many in the coalition, saying that it does not oppose MetroCard vending machines nor the notion that station agents could operate outside the token booth. However, it’s hard to reconcile Transit’s push to reduce the station workforce with the notion that every token clerk will be replaced by customer service representatives.

Rail Yard Swaps Promote Long Island Passenger, Freight Projects

The Long Island Railroad's East Side Access project will gain needed construction staging land in Queens, and the New York & Atlantic Railroad will pay lower track usage fees to the LIRR for its freight trains as a result of an agreement announced by Governor George Pataki earlier this month. NY & Atlantic took over LIRR freight service and yards in Brooklyn, Queens, and Long Island in 1997 under a 20-year lease. Under the new deal, NY & Atlantic will **return Yard A and the Arch Street Yard** in Long Island City to LIRR. The yards are near the planned entrance to the tunnel to Manhattan than the East Side Access project will use.

A separate yard exchange will open up new LIRR Main Line yard space for NY & Atlantic in Hicksville and put to rest a long-standing community dispute with the railroad in Garden City. Since taking over the freight lease, NY & Atlantic has not been able to utilize an intermodal yard in Garden City along LIRR secondary tracks to Mitchell Field. Bowing to local concerns over the impact of increased freight rail and truck traffic on nearby residents, NY & Atlantic signed a moratorium on using the spur, and it has remained under the control of the LIRR. Under the new arrangement, the NY&A will return control over the Garden City freight yard to the LIRR in exchange for the **use of a yard in Hicksville** as a freight transfer site.

Both Governor Pataki and NY & Atlantic Railroad President Chairman Bruce Lieberman hailed the agreements as beneficial to commuter and freight rail operations on Long Island.

When completed in 2010, the Long Island East Side Access tunnel will allow LIRR to run 24 trains per hour to Grand Central Terminal in the morning peak period, in addition to the 37 trains per hour that now run into NY Pennsylvania Station.

Lieberman told *Newsday* that the **lower fees and Main Line yard space** will allow NY & Atlantic to offer more competitive prices for freight movement and to offer additional services, like transporting bulk mail. Only 2% of all goods moved into Long Island now travel by rail, though the national average is roughly 40%.

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



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CALENDAR

August 28, 6-8pm Auto-Free New York meeting, "Lower Manhattan Transportation," walking tour, 104 Washington Street (near Rector St.), Manhattan, 212-475-3394

August 28, 6-8 pm Opening reception for "Working Waterfronts: Integrating Facilities and Communities" exhibit at the Municipal Art Society, 457 Madison Ave., Manhattan. The exhibit runs until Sept. 29, sponsored by the Metropolitan Waterfront Alliance. www.waterwire.net, 800-364-9943.

September 6, Noon Permanent Citizens Advisory Council to the MTA quarterly meeting. 347 Madison Ave., Manhattan, 5th floor. 212-878-7087.

September 8, time TBA. "Vision" workshop for the Sustainable East End Development Study. Town of Easthampton. jkhan@gw.dot.state.ny.us, 212-938-6951.

September 9 NYC Century Bike Tour. Cycling event taking in the best of Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens and the Bronx to benefit bike and pedestrian advocacy. www.transalt.org, 212-629-8080.

September 13-16 Rail-volution conference, San Francisco. "Building Liveable Communities with Transit." Federal Transit Administration, APTA, BART, City of Portland, others. 800-788-7077 www.railvolution.com.

September 20, 1:15pm NYMTC Program, Finance, and Administration Committee Meeting, One World Trade Center. 212-938-3305 or amiles-cole@gw.state.ny.us

September 25, 6-8pm Auto-Free New York meeting: "The New Urbanism — Can Smart Growth Reduce Traffic?" Larry Gould, Congress for New Urbanism transportation task force. 104 Washington Street, Manhattan. 212-475-3394.

September 26-29 TrailLink 2001 trails and greenways conference, St. Louis. Rails-to-Trails Conservancy. 202-331-9696, www.railtrails.org.

October 25-26 Project for Public Spaces Training Session, "How to Turn a Place Around", Manhattan, www.pps.org/nyc_training.htm or Harriet Festing 212-620- 5660

Check www.tstc.org for more calendar items

MTR#331 Contributing: Michelle DiChiara, Lisa Schreiberman Editors: 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