

Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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NEWS

Parkway Begins Congestion Pricing

E-ZPass users on the Garden State Parkway will get a break starting today when tolls at barrier plazas during the peak travel hours drop to 33 cents and to 30 cents at other times. Drivers who pay cash and tokens will continue to be charged 35 cents. Ramp tolls remain 25 cents for all drivers. The new policy provides **an incentive for drivers to travel during less congested hours** and to sign up for E-ZPass, a point that will be underscored when token sales end on January 1st. The Parkway becomes the third toll agency in the region to vary tolls by time of day.

Many question whether the E-ZPass and off-peak **discounts are large enough** to affect behavior. The maximum savings for a person driving the length of the 173-mile Parkway is just 85 cents. Also, because the price variation is created through a discount, rather than a toll increase, the change will cost the Parkway up to \$13 million per year.

- NJ Considers Toll Barrier Removal -

State Senator Joseph Palaia introduced a bill last week that would implement much of the NJ DOT plan for removing barrier tolls from the Parkway (*MTR #329*). To what extent the bill will hew to the four-phase plan remains a topic of great debate.

Initial drafts appropriate \$36 million from the Transportation Trust Fund to begin removal of toll plazas and **installation of one-way, high-speed E-ZPass collection**, a step hailed by transportation reformers and editorial boards (*MTR #330*). But other sections strip the Highway Authority of its bonding powers and set 2012 as the end date for toll collection. The bill appropriates \$36 million from the general fund and \$195 million from the Trust Fund to pay for Parkway capital projects, amounting to almost 20% of all state capital funds available to NJ DOT and NJTransit in a year.

Under mounting criticism over these measures, the bill was pulled from a committee hearing today and is being redrafted. With only a handful of sessions before Democrats take control of the State House and Assembly, **pressure is high to move the bill** to a floor vote. A jumpstart for high-speed toll collection would solidify Acting Governor DiFrancesco's legacy as a leader who took responsible steps to reduce congestion on the Parkway.

Report Details NJTransit Budget Woes

A report released last week by the Rutgers Transportation Policy Institute says NJTransit is **on a collision course with financial crisis**. Echoing a strategic planning document put out by the agency in mid-September, the report's budget analysis projects a combined deficit of \$681 million in operating funds and \$1.5 billion in already committed capital funds over the next five years.

The authors ascribe NJTransit's difficulties to a cycle of shrinking state and federal operating aid, the **use of capital funds to pay for operating expenses**, and resultant borrowing to cover overdue purchases of new train engines and cars as well as other investments in system upkeep. Read the full report at: www.policy.rutgers.edu/tpi/projects.html

NY Transit Crisis Hits Suffolk

The Suffolk County legislature approved a resolution last week that directs Suffolk Bus to prepare for an across-the-board 25-cent fare hike to \$1.75. The resolution instructs transit officials to hold hearings as soon as possible and authorizes the increase immediately afterwards. Suffolk Bus is one of many transit systems statewide buffeted by a **shortfall in annual state operating aid** (*MTR #337*).

According to the NY Public Transit Association (NYPTA), Suffolk Bus will receive 28% less state aid than it expected in 2002. Nassau's Long Island Bus and Westchester's Bee Line also face significant deficits, as do bus systems in Ithaca, Syracuse, Albany, Utica, and Rochester. Suffolk Bus and Albany's Capital District Transportation Authority are the first to publicly discuss fare increases, but a NYPTA "Impact Survey" projects that **more price hikes and service reductions are on the way**. In particular, the survey estimates that Long Island Bus will be forced to reduce or eliminate 23% of its fixed route service without restored state and county aid.

Suburban bus fares have served as bellwethers for urban transit costs. In 1991, L.I. Bus and Suffolk Bus hiked fares to \$1.50, a move emulated by NYC Transit in 1995. Last week, NYC Transit pledged not to raise fares despite the \$530 million operating cost to the agency from the attack on the World Trade Center and a \$255 million operating deficit.

Support Widens for Rte. 110 Transit Plan

A plan to quell Route 110 traffic hatched by town officials in Babylon and Huntington is gaining support among Long Island business leaders, according to the *LI Business News*. The towns hope to create **hubs around railroad stations** at either end of the western Suffolk highway. The stations would become intermodal transfer points where commuters arriving by train or car could take express buses that would travel frequently in the corridor during rush hours (*MTR #325*).

Members of the Long Island Partnership have agreed to write to Governor Pataki and the MTA to asking for a feasibility study on **reopening a defunct rail station in East Farmingdale**. It would become the southern hub, while Huntington Station serves the northern end. Formed in the early 1990's, the Partnership is an organization of chambers of commerce, real estate and other business and civic organizations including the Long Island Association. Another group, Action LI, has already posted a similar letter to the Governor (*MTR #328*).

In recent meetings about the Farmingdale station, skeptics have wondered whether its reopening could increase, rather than relieve, Route 110 traffic. This concern could become more prominent if the station is reopened primarily as a new stop for NYC-bound commuters, rather than as part of the larger proposal to create convenient transit access to Route 110 destinations.

Bus Changes To Speed S.I. Commute

NYC Transit approved major changes to Staten Island bus service at a board meeting last week. They closely resemble recommendation the Campaign made in August, in a plan entitled "An End to Commuter Chaos" (*MTR #331*). Due to increased ridership and shifts in destination from downtown to midtown due to September 11th, Transit will **split a number of express bus lines to provide dedicated lower and midtown services**. The X12 will end its run in Greenwich Village, but will be joined by a rush-hour counterpart, the X42, dedicated to midtown. The X13 and X14, which have the same path in Staten Island and previously served both business districts, will be separated, with the X13 heading downtown and X14 serving midtown.

Four additional Staten Island express bus routes will also be shifted to run through NJ and the Lincoln Tunnel. Prior to September 11th, just two of the lines used the faster New Jersey route to get to midtown. Together, the rerouting and splitting of routes is expected to save commuters about 20 minutes per ride. The changes are expected to be implemented in January and February of next year.

East River Bridge Toll Discussion Continues

Mayor Giuliani's imposition of the carpool rule for entrances to Manhattan below 60th Street has stimulated debate about how to permanently reduce congestion and **reclaim more of Manhattan from heavy traffic**. Several major newspapers have stated that the need for traffic relief in the face of security at river crossing and the long-standing need to improve mobility within the city should lead from the carpool rule to consideration of East River bridge tolls and congestion pricing.

NY Times columnist John Tierney recently took up this theme as part of a magazine series on NYC's future. Tierney wrote that the Mayor's rush hour ban on single occupant vehicles "**showed what New York could become if we take back our streets from the invaders.**" He advocated an extensive Manhattan road pricing system based on barrier-free E-ZPass technology that would ease congestion and free up space now used for driving and parking. "With a few reforms, we could have sidewalks and streets that are safer from terrorists and more inviting for everyone, including drivers."

"Just reducing the number of cars by 10 percent would make a dramatic difference in congestion," consultant and former top city transportation manager Sam Schwartz told Tierney. Schwarz also spoke of an **expansive lower Manhattan pedestrian and traffic calming plan**.

Tierney wrote that revenue from new tolls could contribute to relief like a roll-back of the city's sales tax. However, East River tolls are likely to be an easier sell to motorists and Brooklyn and Queens constituencies if the **revenues are dedicated to better transportation**. Indeed, in the same magazine issue, Alex Marshall calls on city, state and federal governments to underpin the city's economic future with an ambitious set of transit investments, from the Regional Plan Association's concept for an interconnected group of subway, PATH and ferry portals downtown to the Second Avenue subway and better East Coast Amtrak service.

SI Right-Turn Rule on Governor's Desk

NY Governor George Pataki has until Nov. 21 to decide whether to sign or veto a bill to **permit right-turns on red lights in Staten Island**. Borough President-elect James Molinaro, Mayor-elect Michael Bloomberg, Mayor Giuliani and the NYC Dept. of Transportation have all publicly opposed the bill, citing safety concerns (*MTR #330*).

Currently, the ban on right-on-red extends to all five boroughs, though NYC DOT can lift it for certain intersections. With 31% of its signals allowing right-on-red, Staten Island has more intersections without the rule than the other boroughs combined.

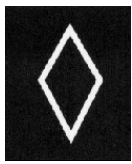
NJ Bypass Activists Ask for Hearing Delay

Regional, state and national environmental and transport reform groups wrote to Acting Governor Don DiFrancesco and NJ DOT Commissioner Weinstein last week asking for the delay of a hearing to begin the environmental impact analysis for a **proposed a 2.3 mile four-lane elevated bypass highway** that would run through the Millstone River watershed in West Windsor Township.

The letter pointed out that a key committee charged with identifying transportation problems in the area of study hadn't even finished its work, stating that, "traffic count, level of service, queue delays at traffic signals, safety (comparative record and severity of crashes), air quality, noise, origin-destination, and other **important data collection...has not been completed.**" The data is not expected to be in before the winter or spring. Activists had twice requested DOT consultants to defer the hearing at increasingly frustrating stakeholder meetings, but were rebuffed.

A year ago this week, then-Governor Whitman ordered the full EIS after vociferous citizen opposition surfaced to the DOT elevated highway plan (MTR #294).

Use of L.I. HOV Lane Flat Over Last Year



Growth in the use of the Long Island Expressway carpool lane increased by less than 1.5% from 2000 to 2001, according to traffic measurements by the NY State Dept. of Transportation.

The information is part of a presentation the DOT has put together entitled "L.I.E. HOV use continues to grow." While use of the HOV lane has increased about 70% since the first segment opened in 1994, the DOT doesn't indicate that **the lane s mileage has increased 150% in the same period.** In 1998, the lane was extended by eight miles and 1999 saw addition of another 10. In other words, the lane is being used less intensively than in the past (growth in lane-miles is outpacing vehicle growth).

The DOT does not offer any context for growth in the HOV lane's use in the form of data on the general traffic trend on the L.I.E. and other east-west highways on Long Island.

The DOT's long range plan for Long Island is centered on construction of about **60 miles of new HOV lanes** on highways other than the Long Island Expressway. Even if the plan somehow became acceptable to the community and environmental groups that have opposed it for years and the state finds the money to expand the roads, the pace of the L.I.E. lane's implementation suggests that the plan could take decades to complete. A final 10-mile segment of the lane is scheduled to open in 2004.

Amtrak Politics:

New Phase or Business as Usual ?

The Amtrak Reform Council, the Congressionally-mandated committee that voted to request a dissolution plan from Amtrak last week, said this week that the railroad's finances are deteriorating and took further shots at its institutional structure.

The Council's vote does not trigger short-term changes or cancellation of Amtrak service. **Congress is not bound by any finding or recommendation** by the Council.

Still, it's possible that the action will force the issue of how to proceed with U.S. passenger rail development. Amtrak's most vociferous critics seem to want rail operations to be privatized, but have not all clearly indicated that subsidized routes in the middle of the country should be abandoned. Amtrak backers point to the much greater federal subsidies given to highways and air travel. The issue may come to a head during **2003 s reauthorization of TEA-21**, the massive multi-year federal surface transportation spending measure.

Also last week, Amtrak was sued by train manufacturer Bombardier, headed by former MTA chair Peter Stangl. The suit claims Amtrak disrupted the company's ability to deliver high-speed Acela train-sets to the railroad in a timely manner, according to the National Corridors Initiative. Amtrak has been seeking damages from the company for delayed delivery of the trains, and also alleges that Bombardier is shirking maintenance work on the trains specified in its contract.

Higher Amtrak ridership after the Sept. 11 attacks **has leveled off** at 1-2% above year-ago levels, while the railroad has seen its security spending rise. Overall U.S. leisure travel is down since September.

Larger US Transit Benefit on Horizon

A federal program that allows employees of participating companies and government agencies to purchase transit fares with pre-tax income will bring greater savings to workers in the metropolitan region after Jan. 1st when the **spending limit increases** from \$65 to \$100 per month. An employee taking the maximum benefit now pays roughly \$20 less each month in commuting costs. In 2002, the new maximum will save transit riders \$33 monthly.

In particular, New York City express bus riders and suburban rail commuters will be aided by the increase. This is expected to **bolster participation in the benefit program** across the region. According to Transit Center, which administers the program, roughly 14,000 companies now offer the transit benefit and 350,000 employees have chosen to receive it in the metropolitan area.

For NYC Transit express bus riders, a monthly

unlimited Metrocard costs \$120, almost twice the \$63 monthly fare for local buses and all subways. Under the expanded program, the real monthly cost of commuting by express bus will drop to \$87. By comparison, car tolls at an MTA bridge or tunnel every weekday cost \$120 per month and crossing the Hudson River costs \$100 per month, meaning that for many in the outer boroughs **taking transit will finally incur a smaller out-of-pocket cost than driving** into Manhattan or New Jersey .

New York City offers the transit benefit to its 134,800 municipal employees, as well as to 223,800 Board of Education employees and 15,300 Housing Authority employees as a special one year unlimited ride card. Since the program began last summer, 14% of eligible municipal workers have enrolled, while the newer NYCHA and Board of Education programs have participation rates of 10% and 2%. The NYC Office of Payroll Administration reports it has received **many requests for express bus Metrocards** and expects a jump in enrollment. The City will not automatically offer the express bus card benefit option in January, but the addition will be part of ongoing labor negotiations next year.

The expanded benefit also will cover a greater portion of a monthly commuter rail ticket. The least expensive monthly ticket to and from Manhattan on Metro-North Railroad is \$94, on the Long Island Railroad, \$103, and on NJTRANSIT, \$70. From other stations, monthly fares range to \$200-250. The benefit is generally in the form of a voucher used towards purchase of a pass or fare card.

Westchester County remains the only large suburban **municipal government with a transit benefit**. Governor John Rowland has said he intends to give the option to Connecticut's 51,000 workers (*MTR #290*). Acting Governor Donald DiFrancesco signed a law last July that changed the New Jersey tax code to allow the state's 76,000 employees to receive the benefit (*MTR #325*). However, to date, neither state has put a program into place, even though it would also save state government money through a reduction in federal payroll taxes.

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



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CALENDAR

November 20, 10:30am NYMTC Access-to-Jobs Planning Group meeting, discussion of post-September 11th changes in regional commuting, Cornell Cooperative Extension, 16 E. 34th St., 8th floor. Gerry Bogacz 718-482-4559

November 27-28 Northeast conference on "context-sensitive design." ConnDOT, Northeast Association of State Transportation Officials \$ Westbrook, CT. 860-486-1384.

November 28, 8am Regional Business Partnership Transportation Symposium and Newark Insiders Forum. NJTPA conference room, 1 Newark Center, 17th floor. 973-242-4219.

November 29, 8:30-4:30 NY Regional Workshop on Bus Rapid Transit. University Transportation Research Center. City College of NY — Steinman Hall. 140th Street and Convent Ave., Manhattan. 732-932-1700.

December 5, 6pm American Society of Highway Engineers, southern NJ chapter meeting, drinks, dinner, speaker: South Jersey transportation capital program, Pirates Inn, Moorestown-Centerton Rd., Mouth Laurel, NJ. 732-888-7700, x. 3077

December 6, 9am-8pm APA Annual Conference: "WTC and Beyond - Challenges Facing Planners." Baruch College, 121 East 25th St. Manhattan 212-228-7875.

December 6, 11:45 am Transportation Research Forum, "The Role of Academia in Regional Transportation Planning," Giovanni's Atrium, 100 Washington St. (at Rector St.) \$. 908-629-5581 pgessner@panynj.gov.

December 6, 4pm Rutgers University Bloustein School policy lecture, NJ DOT Commissioner James Weinstein, "Retrospective Perspective," 33 Livingston Ave., New Brunswick, RSVP, cdanku@rci.rutgers.edu.

December 12, 1:30pm NYMTC Freight Transportation Working Group meeting, NYC Economic Development Corporation building, 110 William St., 4th Fl. Gerry Bogacz, 718-482-4559.

Check www.tstc.org for more calendar items

The Tri-State Transportation Campaign web site:

www.tstc.org