

Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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NEWS

Straphanging Mayor No Car Potato

Mayor Michael Bloomberg rode the #6 subway train from his residence on East 79th Street to City Hall for his New Year's Day inaugural. He has **ridden the subway to work each day since**.

Bloomberg's example is a striking departure from that set by most high-ranking city officials in recent memory. For over ten years, the Straphangers Campaign and Transportation Alternatives have **challenged city leaders** to ride trains and buses, or to walk or bicycle on a regular basis. With few exceptions, such as Ruth Messinger or Elliot Sander, who, as city transportation commissioner, cycled to work weekly, the response has been underwhelming. Even many **top MTA officials** are not known to use city transit regularly. If he keeps it up, Bloomberg will soon surpass the number of times Mayor Giuliani took the subway during his entire eight years.

Some will dismiss Bloomberg's transit-riding as a largely empty gesture. But in politics, symbols matter. As a regular straphanger, Bloomberg will be in a stronger position to defend extension of the Manhattan morning carpool rule, in effect since late September. If city and regional policy is to emphasize mass transit more than in the past, a **"Metrocard Mayor" will be in a strong leadership position**.

There may also be real policy differences in an administration that experiences travel the way most citizens do. Bloomberg lives the Lexington line's crowding and sooner or later will undergo a disruptive commuting nightmare. That could influence attitudes toward the Second Avenue subway, and keep the mayor focused on his idea for creating rapid bus routes on the East Side until the new subway is built.

Of course, one person does not make up NYC government. Will agency heads, borough presidents and City Council members **follow the mayor's example?** Why not slash the city car fleet as a first step in the cost-cutting Bloomberg is asking from each part of city government? Last year, London mayor Ken Livingstone abolished the officials cars London Transport managers had become accustomed to. If the mayor does not issue an order to this effect, look for advocates to renew their "car potato" campaign, holding up Mayor Bloomberg as their hero.

NJ Transit's Holiday Hearings Can't Keep Riders Away

Transit riders and advocates expressed outrage at NJ Transit's proposed fare policy during public hearings on Jan. 2. Despite cold weather and the inconvenient timing of the meetings – late at night the day after a holiday – many of the meetings were well attended.

At NJ Transit headquarters in Newark, protestors gathered outside with bullhorns and banners and the **standing-room-only crowd** shouted and hissed during NJ Transit's presentation. The diverse group spoke against several aspects of the plan, including elimination of round-trip excursion fares, service cuts, and Transit's plan to reserve the right to hike fares again without board approval or more hearings.

Riders **in Camden** made a strong showing, despite conditions that demonstrated a **shocking level of disrespect** for transit customers. The meeting was held in a freezing bus terminal atrium with no microphones. About 50 stayed anyway, saying Transit's rate hikes would stretch already limited incomes.

Many voiced shock and anger as they calculated the increases for their routes – many much higher than the advertised 10% increase. "Increasing the round-trip excursion fare hits me the hardest," Long Hill resident Brad Payeur told the *Courier News*. "That's a forty percent increase, not ten percent."

Others said that NJ Transit needs more revenue, but were not willing to pay more **without getting better service**. "Your fare increase isn't fair," Chris Blaise of Edison told the *Courier News*. "I pay enough for the service you provide."

Many said aspects of the plan would make driving a more attractive option. Owen Leach of Princeton Borough told the *New Jersey Times* he would stop using transit for trips into NYC. "Somewhere well short of \$39 it becomes much more attractive to endure the tunnel and take the car," he said.

Campaign Calls for Stronger Oversight of NJ Transit

Tri-State Transportation Campaign representatives testified at three of NJ Transit's hearings, calling the fare hike plan unbalanced and unfair to riders. The Campaign said the plan illustrates **NJ Transit's lack of accountability** and strongly criticized the agency

for seeking the power to enact future fare increases without any higher approval or public hearings – **writing itself a “blank check” from riders.**

The Campaign suggested that NJ Transit should be re-regulated as a public utility. Its attempt to give itself the power to raise fares over the next few years shows more concern for the bottom line than for provision of an important public service. Regulating NJ Transit as a public utility would be one way to instill oversight into the agency’s budget decisions.

The Campaign also spotlighted the piece-meal approach NJ is using in budgeting for transportation. NJ Transit has budget problems that need to be addressed. But the present plan **seeks new revenue only from transit riders.** A more balanced approach would involve state revenues, revenues derived from motorists and possibly other sources as well. New Jersey’s state gas tax is the third lowest in the country, and has remained flat since 1987 — even longer than NJ Transit fares.

NJ Transit Fares Aren't Cheap — Selected U.S. Commuter Rail Costs —				
Agency	City	Suburb	Miles	Monthly pass price
NJ Transit	New York	Princeton Jct	48	\$249
		Metuchen	27	\$185
SEPTA	Philadelphia	Frazer	24	\$163
Metro-North	New York	Brewster	52	\$211
		Port Chester	26	\$152
LIRR	New York	Smithtown	49	\$200
		Hicksville	25	\$154
MBTA	Boston	Fitchburg	50	\$169
		Lawrence	26	\$145
MARC	Washington	Brunswick	49	\$164
		Dorsey	25	\$123
METRA	Chicago	Fox Lake	49	\$147
		Wheaton	25	\$95
Caltrain	San Francisco	San Jose	49	\$142
		Redwood City	25	\$89

New Jersey Association of Rail Passengers

The Tri-State Transportation Campaign web site:

www.tstc.org

Where’s McGreevey?

NJ Transit watchers are still waiting for New Jersey’s Governor-elect Jim McGreevey to say something about NJ Transit’s fare plan, and to help eliminate its worst aspects. McGreevey, who campaigned as the **candidate of working families and government accountability**, has dodged reporters on the issue. But he is the only figure with the political clout to challenge the NJ Transit board on the plan, which could be approved on January 7. McGreevey does not take office until January 15.

McGreevey’s behavior regarding **another NJ public authority** last week was **markedly different.** In the wake of reports of a worsening E-Z Pass financial debacle, the Governor-elect called for Turnpike director Ed Gross’ resignation. He asked that the Turnpike board **suspend its next meeting**, where it was likely to have approved a large contract for a new E-Z Pass vendor. In this case McGreevey appropriately said the authority should not take action that would foreclose options for his administration.

But so far, McGreevey has given his **tacit approval** not only to NJ Transit’s fare increase, but to its plan to index fares to inflation for the next five years, to render **weekly and monthly fare discounts** into “promotions” that may be rescinded by the Transit staff at any time and to push more people into the jammed 33rd Street PATH line with a big Newark-NYC hike. At this writing, McGreevey has one weekend to make a difference.

Port Authority Considering More Bus-Priority Capacity in Lincoln Tunnel

Heavier bus traffic under the Hudson is leading Port Authority planners to consider using another Lincoln Tunnel lane for buses or a mix of buses and carpools.

A variety of traffic configuration issues at the tunnel entrance will have to be considered in taking such a step, and the PA would like to open up **more capacity** in its **Manhattan bus terminal.**

The *Star-Ledger* reported at the end of December that the PA staff would soon present a plan to its board for opening **26 new gates** in the unfinished fourth level of the bus terminal’s North Wing.

Due to the emergency Manhattan carpool rule, all traffic using the Lincoln Tunnel from 6-10 a.m. must have at least two passengers. The Port Authority is making a wise move to consider **preserving some of this HOV/bus capacity for good** with an additional lane. Bus use of the Lincoln Tunnel exclusive bus lane is up by several hundred since the mid-1990s, and further workplace development on Midtown Manhattan’s west side is underway. The lane is reserved for buses from 5:45 a.m. until 10:00 a.m.

Cross Harbor Freight EIS Begins this Month

The New York City Economic Development Corporation will invite input on the construction of a cross harbor rail freight tunnel and other rail freight options at environmental impact study “**scoping**” meetings in January. EDC estimates that freight traffic across New York Harbor will increase by 40% or more by 2025 and predicts that a rail tunnel would divert 8.6 million tons of freight from truck to rail each year.

The meetings will be held throughout New York City and at several locations in New Jersey. They are listed in our calendar section on the next page.

The EDC maintains that rail freight would be a particularly good investment for the New York/northern New Jersey region because of the size of the local market, and rail’s economic and environmental benefits. The current transportation system presents no

viable alternative to trucking, which contributes to congestion, significant wear and tear on infrastructure and added pollution.

After evaluating several rail freight options, the EDC, in cooperation with the Federal Highway Administration and the Federal Railroad Administration, is likely to conduct its environmental impact statement on three rail freight alternatives. One calls for the construction of a rail freight tunnel under the New York Harbor. The other two include improvements such as more clearance for double-stack container trains and one would emphasize rail-car float routes.

Additional information, including EDC’s draft scoping document, is available at the Cross Harbor Project website: www.crossharborstudy.org

City Takes Aim at Cross Harbor Railroad

According to the *Journal of Commerce*, the New York City Economic Development Council wants to shut down the New York Cross Harbor Railroad. Cross Harbor is the only company that barges rail cars from New Jersey to Brooklyn, although the EDC has developed a modern (though so far, unused) rail float facility in Brooklyn’s 65th Street Yard.

Citing a variety of late fees, fire code violations and chemical dumping practices, the EDC filed an application with the U.S. Surface Transportation Board for an “adverse abandonment” of Cross Harbor’s First Avenue Yard and facilities at the Brooklyn Army Terminal. EDC will also apparently sue in state court to evict the railroad. The filing says that the EDC aims to use the tracks and float bridge as part of a larger redevelopment of Brooklyn maritime facilities and cross-Harbor rail float capacity.

Observers have noted an antipathy by the EDC toward Cross Harbor Railroad. EDC plans to develop a stronger cross-Harbor freight rail car market. The agency appears to view Cross Harbor as more a throwback or remnant of the freight industry’s past than as a forward-looking entity able to capitalize a significant operation and win market share from highway freight. If successful, the EDC’s move will get Cross Harbor out of the float barge equation. It will also raise the stakes for the EDC to get some sort of replacement service underway, and to show that it will attract a larger market than Cross-Harbor did.

Last March, the EDC declined to select Cross Harbor Railroad to run the float bridges it had constructed at the 65th Street Yard. The overall yard was awarded to Canadian Pacific Railroad. Under a subcontract, future float bridge operations at the yard will be operated by NY & Atlantic Railway, which runs freight over the Long Island Railroad network.

Second Avenue Subway Route: To Build or Not to Build Downtown?

At a Manhattan Borough President task force meeting in December, MTA planners presented alternatives for **alignments and stations** for the proposed Second Avenue Subway. So far, the plan’s most controversial aspect is whether to run the subway on **existing J/M subway tracks** south of Houston Street or tunnel a new alignment with stations at Grand St., Chatham Square and two financial district locations.

The J/M alignment would cost less time and money, and provide **access to Brooklyn**. It will be a more direct route for many travelers, but will not build any completely new subway stations south of 23rd Street (14th Street and Houston are served by the L and F/V respectively.) Since there are only two tracks on the J/M trains in lower Manhattan, existing service on that line may have to be curtailed depending on the number of Second Avenue trains being run.

A new lower Manhattan tunnel would create new stations in Chinatown and the financial district. It would also allow for a maximum of new trains to run during rush hours. But new stations and tunnels in the financial district will either have to run over existing subway lines or beneath them. Placing them over other tunnels may prevent the subway from being extended into Brooklyn, because that would cause steep grades where the new tunnel is routed under the East River. Placing them below existing subways would create very deep stations.

The MTA is still pondering whether to build a **116th Street station**. The tunnel built in the 1970’s for the subway did not include this station. However, there is a consensus among community groups and Manhattan elected officials that a 116th Street station should be part of the new plans.

Anti-Trash Train Bill Derailed, For Now

In last December, the New Jersey Assembly's Solid and Hazardous Waste Committee voted to hold a bill that would **curtail New York's ability to move garbage by train** through New Jersey. The bill would have prevented waste from being shipped to New Jersey unless it was already in sealed containers, effectively killing plans to build a waste transfer station in Linden that would have placed garbage in containers after it was barged from New York City.

Originally proposed as a way to prevent future "garbage barges" from entering New Jersey ports, the bill was revived because Central New Jersey citizens object to trash-bearing trains through their towns. The *Star-Ledger* editorialized against the bill, stating that "the idea of using a train **rather than 1,000 trucks** to get the trash through New Jersey has merit."

The bill is not dead and could be revived again next session. If it passes, New York City will be left with two options for exporting waste: move it all by truck, or redesign its existing marine transfer stations so waste can be **containerized in NYC** and moved to any railhead by barge. The latter suggestion has been widely endorsed by city groups including OWN (Organization of Waterfront Neighborhoods.) It will also maximize truck reduction on streets and highways in both New York and New Jersey.

S.I. Developers Must Build Sidewalks

In December the NYC Planning Commission approved amendments to the zoning code that will **mandate four-foot sidewalks in new housing developments**. The zoning change will primarily affect Queens and Staten Island — the only parts of the city with sufficient land for multi-block developments.

According to the 2000 census, Staten Island had the greatest percentage increase in population and Queens the largest absolute population growth in the city. Both are becoming more densely populated. It simply makes sense to provide people a safe way to walk around neighborhoods — new or old.

However, at the end of last year, the Building Industry Association sought an injunction against the rule. According to the *S.I. Advance*, "the builders' recommend creating sidewalks on one side of a private street in order to satisfy City Planning without **'urbanizing desirable private developments.'**" The State Supreme Court rejected the request.

Having been passed by the City Planning Commission, the rule must be acted upon by the City Council by the end of January. The Building Industry Association plans to return to court when the rule passes.

Calendar

Jan. 7, 9am NJ Transit board meeting. Expected approval of fare increase plan. NJ Transit headquarters. One Penn Plaza East, Newark.

January 7, 8pm South Western Regional Planning Agency monthly meeting. 888 Washington Blvd, 3rd floor, Stamford. 203-316-5190, www.swrpa.org

Jan. 10, Noon LIRR Commuters Council, monthly meeting. 347 Madison Ave., Manhattan, 10th Floor. 212-878-7087.

January 11, 9am CT Southwest Regional Planning Agency congestion mitigation plan meeting. 350 Fairfield Ave., Bridgeport. 203-316-5190, www.swrpa.org

January 15, 11am - 3pm Public scoping meeting for NYC Cross-Harbor Freight Project environmental impact statement. NYC Economic Development Corp. 110 William Street, 4th floor. Manhattan. 877-942-7347. Document available at www.crossharborstudy.org.

Jan. 16, 7pm CT Rail Commuter Council meeting. ConnDOT office, New Haven Railroad Station. www.trainweb.org/ct or 203-655-0138.

January 17, Noon Metro-North Commuter Council monthly meeting. 347 Madison Ave., Manhattan. 10th floor. 212-878-7087.

January 17, 5-8pm Public scoping meeting for NYC Cross-Harbor Freight Project environmental impact statement. Snug Harbor Manor, 1000 Richmond Terrace, Staten Island. NYC Economic Development Corp. 877-942-7347.

January 22, 5-8pm Public scoping meeting for NYC Cross-Harbor Freight Project environmental impact statement. Hostos College, East 149th Street/Walton Ave., Bronx. NYC Economic Development Corp. 877-942-7347, crossharbor@stvinc.com.

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



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