

# Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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## NEWS

### Tappan Zee Study Advances

At a NY Metropolitan Transportation Council meeting this week, Westchester County Executive Andrew Spano said that he'd had "an open hearing and adjudication of the County's concerns" about the Tappan Zee Bridge Major Investment Study that he'd held up for several months. With Spano's support, the Council voted to proceed with the examination of **whether or not to replace the Tappan Zee** and how to develop mass transit in the cross-Hudson corridor.

In a June 8<sup>th</sup> letter to NY State Thruway director John Platt, Spano said "I will not support additional commuter lanes on the bridge or any alternative that includes the expansion of I-287, or which would create the conditions leading to expansion sometime in the future" (MTR #318). He further warned that, "mass **transit must be a component of any bridge replacement** or rehabilitation project. A mass transit component is a critical element to the continued vitality of communities on both sides of the bridge that would be directly impacted by a replacement project, and, in my mind, essential to gaining public and municipal support."

In introducing a resolution to move the study forward, the county executive said he'd received assurances that "landfall of any new bridge won't disrupt river communities;" about his "concerns about the footprint of I-287 and expanding it any more;" and that "a mass transit option will be looked at as part of the study." He said he was assured that the study would have a regional, not a corridor approach, and that a significant role will be played by the County in the Thruway Authority-MTA/Metro-North planning process. None of the assurances were in writing.

When pressed by Tri-State Campaign director Janine Bauer, who asked whether he had been given a commitment that construction funding would have to accompany any proposed transit plan, Spano said, "We are with you on the transit funding issue." His transportation commissioner put it more bluntly: "Our approach has been, '**Show us the money**'."

A group of 18 lower Hudson municipalities again asked for money to hire independent analysts to judge the soundness of the existing bridge and replacement or repair proposals.

### McGreevey Alarms Sprawl Foes

Editorial boards around New Jersey lambasted Governor Jim McGreevey on Friday for **wiping out** the professional staff of the **Office of State Planning** with layoffs earlier in the week. The Office oversees New Jersey's State Development and Redevelopment Plan, which on paper directs development to cities and other areas with mature infrastructures.

McGreevey had campaigned on an anti-sprawl platform, and pledged to strengthen the state plan. Now, the *Bergen Record* calls him "**a man without a plan**," and other papers question his commitment to contain sprawl. In response to the flap, McGreevey said he would reconstitute the state planning office in the future, and launch a task force on sprawl issues.

The editorials drew attention to the loss of experience at the planning office. But perhaps some good can come from reorganizing anti-sprawl efforts. **Executive agencies** whose projects have profound land use impacts like the NJ Department of Transportation **have never taken the state plan seriously**. But state agencies and their capital and local aid programs have the ability to structure public investment and encourage municipal behavior in ways that can strongly reinforce state plan policies. If McGreevey can get the big agencies behind the state plan, it will be a step forward New Jersey's struggle with sprawl.

### Pataki Budget Meets Promise on Fares

The main transportation features of the 2002-2003 NY State budget proposed last week by Governor George Pataki are significant **increases in operating aid for mass transit**, and the maintenance of last year's spending levels for highways and bridges.

Pataki's proposed transit aid budget makes good on the governor's promise to hold fares stable through 2002. If enacted by the legislature in a timely way, the budget would keep fares whole not only for NYC Transit and the suburban commuter railroads, but also for smaller transit systems around the state. However, because of a major shortfall in state aid last year, a number of suburban bus and upstate agencies and preparing now for fare increases. Transit advocates will have to battle to keep those agencies from proceeding while the budget is considered in Albany. The state budget is legally due for final approval in

April, but the deadline is generally ignored. Last year, nothing was approved until September.

The executive budget increases transit operating spending in part by accelerating aid payments that normally take place later in the state's fiscal year. This change better synchronizes the state with transit agency budget schedules, many of which use a calendar fiscal year, resulting in a one-time aid bonus. It also relies on release of undistributed balances in state mass transit operating accounts and from an infusion of aid from the state's general fund.

While many refer to Pataki's transit policy as smart election-year spending, it also makes transportation sense at this juncture. **Affordable mass transit** is essential to keeping the city and downstate region moving as the **recovery from September 11** continues. Preventing fare increases that would hit economically vulnerable populations is also good policy during an economic downturn. Likewise, maintaining government capital spending is a classic fiscal response to recession.

Nonetheless, Pataki's transportation budget came in for criticism from gubernatorial hopeful **Andrew Cuomo**, who **urged more road spending**. Cuomo's remarks used language very much like that used by road-lobby groups in Albany, who in recent years have called for a several-fold hike in NY State highway spending. "New York currently ranks at the bottom of the barrel in the condition of its roads and bridges," Cuomo told the Albany *Times-Union*.

We'll provide more on the transportation elements of Governor Pataki's executive budget in *MTR #351*.

### **Less Federal Transportation Aid in Fiscal '03**

The U.S. Treasury Dept. is predicting a \$9.1 billion reduction in expected federal transportation spending next year due to **plunging gas tax receipts**, according to a Friday *Washington Post* report. The shortfall may further strap state transportation departments around the country. Most agencies are already grappling with recession-bound state budgets.

Virginia and Maryland officials contacted by the *Post* said the loss of aid would likely require postponing some road and transit projects to keep others from stalling in the midst of construction.

It's unclear as yet what impact the federal reductions will have in New York, New Jersey or Connecticut. Governor Pataki's proposed budget calls for the same level of spending on roads and bridges as last year (see story above). Release of NJ DOT's capital program is reportedly being delayed as the new administration sorts out its priorities.

The American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials led a conference call yesterday about the problem with officials from 40 states.

### **Ray of Hope on Suffolk Fares**

Last Tuesday evening, bus riders objected to Suffolk Transit's proposed 25-cent bus fare increase. If the fare hike is imposed, Suffolk would charge the highest local bus fares — \$1.75 — in NY State.

The release of **Governor Pataki's proposed budget** the same day held out some hope that the fare hike could be averted. It contains sufficient operating aid increases for Suffolk Transit to keep fares stable.

County officials have said that they cannot place much trust in Albany's budget making processes. But County Executive Robert Gaffney sustained hopes by writing to State Senator Cesar Trunzo on the day of the hearing. Trunzo, the State Senate's transportation committee chair, has publicly said the Suffolk fare increase is unnecessary because he can find the money to fill the budget gap. **Gaffney's letter requests Trunzo's aid** in finding such funds, stating that the county's objectives are "offsetting these transportation shortfalls and **postponing a fare increase**."

However, the county has set **February 11** as its date for actually raising the fare, so time to work out a deal that the county will believe in is short.

### **Group Says CT's Roads Among Nation's Worst**

Connecticut roads are among the worst in the nation, according to a report released by The Road Information Project (TRIP) in December. The study says that over half the state's roads are in mediocre or poor condition. Only California, Massachusetts and Missouri have a higher portion of roads in mediocre or poor condition, according to TRIP.

TRIP — a Washington-based lobby group whose members are primarily companies in the heavy construction and road materials industries — routinely releases information on road system deficiencies, and calls for more highway spending. But its analysis of Connecticut is significant because its findings fly in the face of the **widely held perception** that Connecticut merits high marks for the sustained **road and bridge maintenance effort** it has undertaken since the collapse of the Mianus River Bridge in 1983. According to the *Hartford Courant*, state officials were surprised by the report. It should be taken "with a grain of salt," DOT spokesman John Wallace told the *Stamford Advocate*.

The Tri-State Campaign has attempted to obtain the report — so far unsuccessfully. According to newspapers, it finds that 37% of CT roads are in mediocre condition and 17% are in poor condition.

It's possible that the gap between the common wisdom in Connecticut and the research findings can be found on **local roads**. While the state has focused its maintenance efforts on interstates and state highways, state resources devoted to other roads in CT

have been declining for decades. The CT Conference of Municipalities says that inflation-adjusted levels of **Town Aid for Roads** — the state's main local aid transportation program — have been dropping since the 1960s. Research commissioned by the Conference found that fixing deficient local roads and bridges in the state would cost well over \$300 million.

In its 2001 "green paper," the CT Transportation Choices Coalition called on the state to significantly boost Town Aid. The paper pointed to resources for controversial projects like widening US Routes 6 and 7, I-84 and a variety of state routes as money that would be better spent on local road repair.

TRIP told the press that CT and other New England states are seeing a significant growth in truck traffic, contributing to more rapid deterioration of roads.

### Rowland Extends DOT Commissioner Search

Although Connecticut DOT chief **James Sullivan** will retire at the end of January, Governor Rowland plans to extend the search for his replacement, according to the *Stamford Advocate*. Recent speculation had pointed to ConnDOT's Jim Byrnes and the next transportation commissioner. Byrnes' position as chief of ConnDOT's Bureau of Engineering and Highway Operations has long been seen as a stepping-stone to the commissionership.

In a break with tradition, Rowland will appoint an interim replacement while tasking the **Transportation Strategy Board**, created last summer to study transportation needs, with leading a national search for a permanent commissioner.

During creation of the strategy board last year, some urged that it be formally empowered with appointing the transportation commissioner. That recommendation was a non-starter, but it appears the group will have a strong role in the decision.

Many Connecticut lawmakers hope the Governor's move signals new direction for ConnDOT. During last year's transportation summit and the swirl of media attention to deficiencies in Connecticut's transportation system, many pointed to **the agency's limited repertoire** as the state's biggest problem. which lawmakers have criticized for not addressing the state's long-term transportation needs.

"There has been extensive focus on highways and bridges," Transportation Strategy Board Nelson "Oz" Griebel chair told the *Advocate*. He said the board will seek a commissioner who considers land-use and economic impacts of transportation strategy.

### The HOV Rule — View from Above

"It looks like mandatory carpooling has really had an effect on traffic at the Lincoln and Holland Tunnels, where delays are minimal.

"However, there are 30-minute backups at the GWB, where there is no ban on single-occupant vehicles."

— *Transcribed verbatim from 1010 WINS traffic report, Monday, Jan. 14, 2002, 8:21 a.m.*

### Battles Still Rage: Main Streets or Highways?

Despite accumulated evidence that turning main streets into high-volume highways deadens downtowns by driving away businesses and pedestrians, communities across our region and country continue to face DOT proposals to do just that.

Near Albany, the NY State DOT plans to **widen Routes 9/20** through the center of **East Greenbush** to facilitate a projected 40-50% increase in traffic over the next 20 years. The plan has strenuous objection from some citizens, but hemming and hawing of town government has kept the project on track.

A recent op-ed piece in the *Times-Union* by Paul Bray, a Capitol District civic leader, compared the situation to the 1970s destruction of Central Avenue between Albany and Schenectady by a similar road "improvement" project. Bray remembered a store owner who said elimination of angle parking along the avenue would change it from a destination to a place to drive through — to a "traffic sewer" in the terms used now by traffic calming advocates. "**DOT was writing the last chapter of the Avenue's life** as a retail destination," wrote Bray.

DOT says Routes 9 and 20 are "in transition from residential to ma and pa business and now to a future of big box stores" (i.e. car-dependent sprawl). DOT's road plan will facilitate that transition. This from an agency that protests far and wide that it **does not engage in land use planning**. Bray perfectly nailed the crux of the dispute and the contradictions at work within post-interstate DOTs:

"Opponents of the project have bought the state's quality community vision of solid, mixed-use and walkable communities advocated by the governor. Yet DOT is advancing the death sentence for that vision. How does this happen? DOT has changed in some ways since the Central Avenue project. It now claims a greater recognition of local concerns through "context-sensitive design." Accommodating pedestrians and bicycles to some degree is standard practice. But DOT hasn't changed what it sees as its auto-centric job one, protecting the state

The Tri-State Transportation Campaign web site:

[www.tstc.org](http://www.tstc.org)

highway system. That creates an inherent conflict with communities that want to be their own livable place, instead of a corridor for autos.”

There is some hope for better planning procedures that give more weight to community concerns. NY State DOT has entered into a number of partnerships with municipal governments to seek “sustainable development strategies,” for instance ( *MTR* 284, 306). Unfortunately, these are still regarded as “pilot” projects and are outweighed by projects like that in East Greenbush, and by the DOT’s big long- range plan to further pave over Long Island.

Cautionary tales for East Greenbush abound. Around the region, citizens, business owners and local governments are trying to undo earlier changes that turned main streets into highways.

At a recent community meeting in **Lawrence**, north of Trenton, residents and business owners told New Jersey DOT that they want lower speed limits, more parking, and a tidier appearance along Business Route 1. Residents also said they want to see senior housing, recreational activities, and businesses that support the community, such as coffee shops, hardware stores and ice cream parlors, to line the street.

NJ DOT staffers said they would seek traffic calming projects that would make streets more safe while maintaining traffic volumes for businesses.

Citizen agitation about dangerous driving along NY Route 9, led by activist Maureen Morgan, convinced the Village of **Ossining**, along the Hudson in Westchester County, to hire a consultant who recommended the highway be narrowed within the village. Additional recommendations include downtown parking along Route 9, better crosswalks and other pedestrian amenities. Even if the village backs the plan, the NY State DOT will have to approve its implementation.

Across the river in Rockland County’s **Sloatsburg**, main street is the eastern end of Route 17. Citizens there want to redesign the highway back into a village main street. A planning committee headed by village trustee Bill Duffy is proposing a master development plan that will recommend reducing the four-lane road to two lanes and adding shoulders, better sidewalks and bike lanes. The plan has already won editorial support from the *Journal News*.

## TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



*Mobilizing the Region*

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## Calendar

**January 29, 5-8pm** Public scoping meeting for NYC Cross-Harbor Freight Project environmental impact statement. LaGuardia College, 31-10 Thomson Ave., Queens. NYC EDC. 877-942-7347, [crossharbor@stvinc.com](mailto:crossharbor@stvinc.com).

**January 30, 11am-3pm** Public scoping meeting for NYC Cross-Harbor Freight Project environmental impact statement. Jersey City City Hall, 280 Grove Street. NYC EDC. [crossharbor@stvinc.com](mailto:crossharbor@stvinc.com) 877-942-7347

**January 30, 5-8pm** Public scoping meeting for NYC Cross-Harbor Freight Project environmental impact statement. Elizabeth High School, 600 Pearl Street, Elizabeth. NYC Economic Development Corp. 877-942-7347, [crossharbor@stvinc.com](mailto:crossharbor@stvinc.com).

**January 31, 1:30-3:30pm** NYMTC Freight Working Group Meeting. Auditorium at CUNY Center, 99 Hudson St., Manhattan. 718-472-3177, [atyrell@gw.dot.state.ny.us](mailto:atyrell@gw.dot.state.ny.us)

**January 31, 6-8pm** Public meeting to solicit federal transportation enhancement project proposals, NYC Dept. of City Planning. 22 Reade St., 1st floor. Manhattan. 718-486-6327, [dkletsman@gw.dot.state.ny.us](mailto:dkletsman@gw.dot.state.ny.us)

**February 5, 10:30am** Long Island Sound Ferry Coalition meeting. Location TBA. 718.472.3177 or [atyrell@gw.dot.state.ny.us](mailto:atyrell@gw.dot.state.ny.us)

**February 7, 11:45am** Transportation Research Forum Meeting, "The Role of Cost in Port Selection," Dr. John Ricklefs, Moffatt & Nichol Engineers. Giovanni's Atrium, 100 Washington St. 212-435-4226

**February 13 8:30am-4pm** NYMTC Freight Forum. City College, Manhattan 718-472-3046

**February 14, 8:30am-2pm** Conference: "Market-based solutions to NYC's traffic woes." Manhattan Institute. 1 W. 54th Street. 212-599-7000 x412, [www.manhattan-institute.org](http://www.manhattan-institute.org)

**February 21, 5:30-7:30pm** MTA NYC Transit President's Forum with Lawrence Reuter. MTA Headquarters, 347 Madison Ave., 5th Floor, Manhattan. 212-878-7087

[more calendar entries at www.tstc.org](http://www.tstc.org)