

# Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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## NEWS

### Carpool Critics' Weak Case

NYC City Council member David Weprin from eastern Queens took on the Manhattan carpool rule this week. Weprin used the numbers produced by the Sam Schwartz company (MTR #353) for the parking garage industry and other groups to assert that the rule is causing a harsh economic impact in Manhattan. Weprin said he would **introduce a resolution** calling for the carpool rule's repeal in late February and is currently rounding up support for it.

Brooklyn and Queens supporters of the carpool rule would do well to urge their City Council members to refrain from supporting Weprin's resolution.

As we've written previously, the garage owners and their report attempt to lay the **impacts of recession**, Sept. 11-related job losses, highway and street closings, heightened security — including bridge and tunnel checkpoints — and the carpool rule entirely on the rule itself. A close look at the garage report suggests that, because the carpool rule encourages carpooling, 10,000 fewer people are reaching the Manhattan central business district by car than did prior to September 11. This perspective makes the report's already stretched argument even weaker.

While Weprin will likely try to canvass Brooklyn and Queens Council members first to build support for his resolution, it is important to remember that the worst traffic in late September, as drivers and truckers tried to return to normal routines, was not in Manhattan, but on the **bridge and tunnel approaches in western Brooklyn and Queens**. City transportation commissioner Iris Weinshall called the traffic on Sept. 24 "the worst in the city's history." Traffic backed up from the Manhattan and Brooklyn Bridges far into Park Slope, and from the Queensborough Bridge well into central Queens. With terrorism alerts and vehicle searches still occurring, the rule may keep recurrences of such nightmares at bay.

The garage owners' study also ignores the very **high costs of traffic congestion** to NYC, and that a better working city will be better off economically in the long run. As the *Daily News* argued in an editorial Friday, "don't be hasty and abolish the SOV restrictions. They are doing far, far more good than harm. If, indeed, they are doing any harm at all."

### Opinion-Makers Support East River Tolls

Mayor Bloomberg's interest in new tolls on city-owned bridges received significant editorial support this week. Both the *Daily News* and *Newsday* said tolling the East River bridges would be both **feasible and beneficial**.

The *News* stated that the carpool rule "continues to work, easing congestion and reducing pollution. Tolling the East River bridges could do that and more. Namely, raise revenues to maintain the spans and expand the city's transportation infrastructure."

The *News* specifically called on Brooklyn Borough President Marty Markowitz, who issued a statement opposing East River tolls, to engage the mayor in a rational debate and offer his own ideas rather than attempt to shout the idea down with appeals to the low political denominators.

*Newsday*, distributed primarily to a Long Island and Queens readership, predicted a big fight over any specific toll proposal. But the paper said **new tolls "may be necessary."**

"The benefits of the mayor's plan wouldn't just be financial," *Newsday's* piece argued. "Tolls on the four city crossings would prompt some commuters to use public transportation and help cut some of Manhattan's chronic gridlock. And as transit ridership improves, the new tolls would help shore up the financial base of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's subway, bus and commuter rail system."

Early attacks on the Mayor's inclusion of toll revenue in a budget out-year centered on the old canard that "**free**" access between various parts of New York City must be maintained, and on the argument that **tolls would cause pollution** because of backups on bridge approaches.

"Placing tolls on the bridges would make people feel imprisoned," said City Council member Diana Reyna of Brooklyn. The statement reflects the deep-seated windshield perspective that afflicts NYC elected officials. Unlike most of their constituents, **who daily pay fares to travel within the city** by subway and bus, many politicians seem to experience the city almost exclusively by car. Those making such statements should consider that the fastest growing county in New York State is Staten Island, which

is surrounded by toll crossings. Tolls have clearly not created any sort of economic deterrent there.

Markowitz' statement asserted that, despite E-ZPass, tolls would create traffic back-ups, indicating the need for more public education on E-Z Pass' potential to process toll payments in a barrier-free environment, where cars and trucks can pay tolls while traveling at normal highway or street speeds. The Port Authority is developing a **high-speed toll collection** facility at the Palisades Parkway/George Washington Bridge interchange.

### **New Jersey Drops Plan to Relax Truck Bans on Smaller Highways**

In his first week on the job, New Jersey Dept. of Transportation Commissioner James Fox called off a plan that he said his successor had created without enough outreach to affected communities.

A NJ DOT announcement last week proposed to **allow large trucks access to 65 miles** on 12 highways in 9 counties from which the **trucks had been excluded in 1999** (the overall policy covers 285 miles on state highways and 440 on county roads). The announcement infuriated mayors in central NJ.

Fox told the *Star-Ledger* that the easing of the ban was developed by his predecessor, James Weinstein, before he left the agency in January. The bans apply to trucks that are 102 inches wide (the largest on the roads) and are traveling between states, to reduce truck impacts on smaller highways.

The proposal was presented by DOT as a way to reduce roundabout truck routing created by gaps in the road network for big trucks. The Campaign tried to locate a **DOT analysis** that led to the proposal and route selection, but it is not clear that one exists.

The policy banning the biggest trucks from many segments of state and county highways in NJ is still being contested in court by the American Trucking Association. Last March, a federal judge said the rules were not obviously discriminatory, but called for a full trial and examination of detailed evidence.

Commissioner Fox withdrew the plan after hearing **strong opposition from New Jersey mayors**. On Thursday, the *Mercer Times* printed criticism of the ban from the mayors of Trenton, Hamilton and Ewing, who said lifting the ban was a mistake and that allowing trucks on smaller highways would damage the quality of life in their communities.

Fox' move was clearly the right one. A good follow up would be **extension of the ban to 96 inch-wide trucks**, as some municipalities have requested. A more effective ban would also include all big trucks on New Jersey roads. The current ban only applies to trucks that are not based or do not stop in New Jersey. Other trucks can use almost any road they want.

### **Gaffney Confirms Fare Hike May be Temporary**

In a letter responding to comments on the recent Suffolk Transit bus fare increase, Suffolk County executive Robert Gaffney confirmed that the County would **rescind the fare hike** if the additional state operating assistance indicated in Governor Pataki's proposed budget is approved by the state legislature.

Unfortunately, Suffolk bus riders may now have to wait well into summer to see their fares restored to \$1.50. The problem could have been avoided if Suffolk had taken up State Senate Transportation Committee Chair Cesar Trunzo's offer of immediate state emergency aid in January.

In any event, the Campaign very much appreciates Senator Trunzo's efforts to spare Suffolk's riders from the fare increase. We hope the state budget will be passed in a relatively timely way this year.

### **West Midtown Plan Foresees Wider Streets, More Parking, More Traffic**

Although the NYC Dept. of City Planning says development plans would make the Far West Side a "transit-oriented, pedestrian-friendly urban central business district" over the next 20 years, some aspects of the plan the agency is developing may work against that vision. Of particular concern are proposals to **widen streets** and the **West Side Highway**, and to require big additions to the parking supply in the district.

City Planning, which is still working on the development plan, is considering two main options with some significantly different transportation elements. The more intensive scenario, called the "Office Use Alternative," projects development of primarily office, retail and hotel space, with some residential development. The "Multi Use Alternative" would substitute a sports and entertainment facility for office space in the the westernmost part of the area.

Both strategies would create a larger flow of people into the West Side. While City Planning's transportation analysis found that transit would account for the vast majority of projected trips, both scenarios plan to accommodate big increases in automobile traffic. In both scenarios, all new development would be required to provide **on-site parking facilities**, constituting thousands of new parking spaces. The intensive development plan also proposes **widening 30th Street** between 8th Avenue and the Hudson and the **West Side Highway** from 29th St. to 43rd St.

Both plans propose the following changes:

- Use of articulated buses, which hold over twice the passengers of existing buses, on the M-31, M-34/M-16 and M42 routes.
- Re-striping and regulating on-street parking to add traffic lanes in some areas.

- Mandated on-site parking for new development.
- Displaced bus parking, requiring new facilities.

Some aspects of the two plans that differ:

- Multi-Use Alternative would include improvements at 6 subway stations, Office Use only 5.
- Multi-Use would add 64 buses to routes in the district during a.m. peak and 61 during p.m. peak, Office Use 105 and 138 respectively.
- Office-Use would widen 30<sup>th</sup> Street and the West Side Highway.
- Multi-Use would widen sidewalks to 20 ft. along 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> Avenues between West 29<sup>th</sup> and West 40<sup>th</sup> Streets, Office-Use has less widening.
- Office-Use would add 25, 000 **new parking spaces** and Multi-Use would add 16,000.

While transit service would be upgraded under both development plans, the changes could come at the cost of other, more pressing, transit expansions. Earlier this month, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg said that a No. 7 subway extension – a key transit element for West Side development – was his top transit priority. Any extension in West Side service — likely from Times Square to the Javitz convention center — would serve new trips to primarily new destinations riders, rather than improving service for the system’s existing ridership.

The #7 proposal would compete with construction of the long-postponed Second Avenue subway, a project integral to relieving overcrowding on the overwhelmed Lexington Avenue line.

### Hartford Will Debate Transit, Traffic Calming Measures

Legislators in Connecticut have introduced bills this session that reflect a number of themes promoted by transportation reformers. The proposals include:

- Restoration of funds the Rowland Administration took from **CT Transit bus operations**, triggering service cuts.
- Creation of a state **local aid fund** (using 15% of the federal hazard elimination money received by ConnDOT from the Federal Highway Administration) to encourage towns to implement **traffic calming** projects in busy pedestrian areas or spots that are otherwise dangerous to pedestrians.
- Establishment of **commuter rail service** between New Haven and Hartford. This bill attracted widespread co-sponsorship throughout central CT last year.

### Brooklyn-Queens Bridge Project Closer to Decision Point

New York State Dept. of Transportation is considering four scenarios for repairing or replacing the **Kosciuszko Bridge**, where the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway (I-278) crosses Newtown Creek. The four scenarios being considered are: aggressive bridge maintenance, rehabilitating the structure in kind, rehabilitating the structure with extra lanes and replacing the whole bridge with a larger one.

Construction plans for the bridge were first announced in 1995, when NY State DOT planned to build another bridge **along side the existing one** during reconstruction (*MTR #47*). Most controversial in that plan was that DOT claimed the new bridge would be a rehabilitation project, which – despite the added capacity – would exempt it from air quality considerations. The “twin” element of construction seems to be absent from DOT’s recent set of options.

A public hearing on the project will be held this Wednesday (see calendar). Dorothy Neary of the United Forties Civic Association told the *Daily News* that her community group would be in attendance to **oppose road expansion**. “Ever since Robert Moses built the Long Island Expressway and took half of our community away, we have been suffering,” she said. “We want to make sure there is not another land grab and that something is done about the **truck traffic on our residential streets**.”

Separately, Mayor Bloomberg’s budget plan delays projects on two city-owned bridges. Rehabilitation of the Willis Avenue Bridge over the Harlem River and construction of a new ramp between the Brooklyn Bridge and the FDR Drive will be put on hold if the mayor’s proposal is adopted by the City Council.

### Congress Seeks to Cushion Blow to Highway Fund

After the Bush 2003 budget projected that falling gas tax revenue would cause a **\$9 billion reduction** in FY03 federal highway aid to states, legislators in both the House and Senate scrambled to introduce legislation to restore highway funding. AASHTO, the national organization of **state highway agencies**, clearly was effective in sounding the alarm on Capitol Hill. During the first week of February, identical bills with prominent bipartisan sponsorship were introduced to restore \$4.4 billion of the lost funding. The restoration would add pressure to the Bush Administration’s budget plan. The president’s position on making up some of the highway fund with other revenue so far is not clear. In testimony to Congress, FHWA Administrator Mary Peters said the cuts were a function of gas tax revenues, not a policy decision.

Most federal transportation funding to state DOTs

The Tri-State Transportation Campaign web site:

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

comes through the Highway Trust Fund. It is automatically adjusted according to gas tax receipts and big-rig truck sales — a feature known as Revenue Aligned Budget Authority (RABA). When this system was established under the Transportation Equity Act of 1998, **mass transit agencies opted out of the RABA process**, choosing guaranteed funding levels that do not fluctuate based on revenue. Until this year, RABA had boosted federal highway coffers as gas tax receipts exceeded projections. Indeed, the projected \$9 billion reduction is from upwardly-adjusted RABA levels. If one takes TEA-21 authorized levels as the starting point, the **cut is closer to \$5 billion**. The legislation in Congress would come close to restoring highway spending to those levels.

While funding reaching transit agencies via the Federal Transit Administration is not affected, federal highway funds that are “flexed” to transit programs may be at risk. Transportation Enhancements and Congestion Mitigation/Air Quality (CMAQ) funds, which support non-highway projects like bicycle and pedestrian improvement projects, are subject to RABA. Enhancements tend to be spent at a slower rate by states than other funds, and may see further neglect if funds lessen. The Bush budget also targets CMAQ for a specific cut. NYC Transit uses a significant portion of the CMAQ funds coming to NYC.

Support for the legislation to restore some of the RABA-affected funds is gaining in Congress. Republican Senator Pete Domenici, ranking member of the Senate Budget Committee, announced his support last week. In the House, the bill has 227 co-sponsors, including 74 of the 75 members of the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee. However, House Appropriations Committee spokesman John Scofield told the *Las Vegas Review Journal* that several members of that committee oppose the bill.

Nebraska Governor Mike Johanns told the *Lincoln Journal Star* that a coalition of governors is putting pressure on the Bush administration and Congress for restoration of the **full \$9 billion shortfall**. In response to these developments, it is likely that states will develop proposals to “smooth out” swings in revenue for the federal highway program for next year’s debate over the reauthorization of TEA-21.

## TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



*Mobilizing the Region*

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## Calendar

**February 26, 6-8pm** Auto-Free NY meeting. "Beyond Petroleum - A New Vision for Transportation", Ashok Gupta, National Resources Defense Council. 104 Washington St., Manhattan. 212-475-3394

**February 27, 5-9pm** Kosciuszko Bridge Open House to discuss development scenarios. St. Cecilia's Church, 84 Herbert St. Brooklyn.

**February 27, 5:30-7:30pm** MTA Long Island Railroad President's Forum with Kenneth Bauer. MTA Headquarters, 347 Madison Avenue, 5th Fl Board Room, Manhattan. 212-878-7087, [mail@pcac.org](mailto:mail@pcac.org)

**February 28, 10am** Public hearing on CT Bicycle Coalition proposal for pedestrian and bicyclist safety bill. State Legislative Office Building, Hartford. [info@ctbike.org](mailto:info@ctbike.org)

**March 4, 6-8pm** Second Avenue Subway Public Advisory Committee Meeting. MTA Headquarters, 347 Madison Avenue. 5th Fl Bard Room, Manhattan. 718-694-5164 or [secondavenuesubway@nyct.com](mailto:secondavenuesubway@nyct.com)

**March 6, 6pm** Public hearing on Proposed Brooklyn Bus Route Changes Public School 257, Auditorium. 60 Cook St. Brooklyn 212-878-7483

**March 7, 11:45am** Transportation Research Forum, "The Future of Amtrak and Amtrak Reform" 212-435-4226 or [pffessner@panynj.gov](mailto:pffessner@panynj.gov)

**March 8, 12-2pm** City Club of New York luncheon forum with Iris Weinshall, Christopher Boylan and Frank McArdle. "What are the Issues facing the City for the Future?" National Arts Club, 15 Gramercy Park South, Manhattan. 212-207-3673

**March 26, 6-8pm** Auto-Free New York meeting. "Transporting NYC's Waste - There's Got to be a Better Way," Benjamin Miller, Author. 104 Washington St., Manhattan. 212-475-3394

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