

Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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NEWS

Gas Tax Talk Alive and Well in Trenton

New Jersey headlines swirled last week with seemingly conflicting reports about the possibility of a hike in the state's gas tax. While an *Associated Press* headline read "McGreevey **rules out gas tax**," Trentonologists saw that the fine print in the Governor's statements still left open a chance that a state gas tax hike could be used to **boost transportation** capital spending in the Garden State.

As in January, McGreevey told reporters that a gas tax hike would be irrelevant to balancing the general budget. That is the case, however, largely because the gas tax has become increasingly linked to New Jersey's Transportation Trust Fund due to pressing transportation investment needs. Dedicating a gas tax increase to the general fund might play poorly with the public, and would foreclose the state's most robust option for addressing **NJ Transit's budget woes** and the need to develop a highway capital plan that makes progress on the state's **back-log of deficient pavement and bridges**. McGreevey told the *Star-Ledger* that, "long term, we also need to understand the importance of infrastructure investment."

Although revenue measures like the 2000 Trust Fund renewal and the 1999 bond act were supported by transportation reformers, New Jersey DOT's refusal to live up to maintenance and other goals in the 2000 Trust Fund law may mean that a **natural constituency** for a gas tax increase would **oppose it instead**. Without significant revision of NJDOT's capital program (*MTR #355*), those groups would be forced to explain to the motoring public that the state had reneged on the promises it used to sell its past two transportation revenue-raising campaigns.

Region's Senators the Good Guys in Sorry U.S. Energy Debate

Senators from New Jersey, New York and Connecticut favored the measure defeated by the full Senate last week to increase car fuel efficiency standards 50% over 13 years.

The six — Senators Clinton, Corzine, Dodd, Lieberman, Schumer and Torricelli — also voted against the feeble substitute that the Senate approved. The approved bill directs the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration to study the issue.

"Streamlining" or Steamrolling?

House Transportation Chair Pushes Radical Bill

Don Young of Alaska, chair of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, has drafted and widely disseminated a bill that would "streamline" surface transportation project **environmental and historic impact reviews** by state and federal agencies, essentially cutting the public out of the process. The bill does not mention public participation, but creates a rigid, inter-agency process to eliminate "delay."

Environmental and transportation reform groups and urban advocates told Capitol Hill staffers they vociferously opposed the bill's provisions and would seek to head it off before it gathers momentum. They predicted that a fight over the bill would re-polarize highway lobby and transportation reform groups who had been looking forward to a bipartisan, forward-looking **renewal of the U.S. transportation funding law** in 2003.

Washington insiders quoted in the March 9 edition of the *National Journal* say Young is seeking to put his stamp on the transportation job, after inheriting it from renowned pork-wielder Bud Shuster. He brings a reputation as a dogged partisan fighter from his recent post atop the House Natural Resources committee. The transportation committee has traditionally had a relatively bipartisan culture. Members from both sides of the aisle are likely to feel heat from constituents if Young tries to push the streamlining bill through. But staff has indicated he is looking for **hearings as soon as April**.

Perhaps to presage the battle, Young has introduced the **Airport Streamlining** Approval Process Act, which, among other things, eliminates the US-DOT secretary's ability to take into account, when determining whether to approve an airport expansion project, "the interests of the community in or near which the project may be located" and whether those interests "have been given fair consideration."

The environmental streamlining bill, called "Expediting Project Delivery to Improve Transportation and the Environment Act" (**EXPEDITE**), fundamentally shifts the balance of power from state DOTs and transit properties to federal transport agencies, making FHWA or FTA the lead sponsor and deci-

sionmaker for all aspects of project delivery, from the determination of projects' purpose and need, feasible and prudent alternatives, timelines for concurrent NEPA and permit reviews, the determination of preferred alternatives and the record of decision. State natural resource and historic preservation officers generally will have just 60 days to review projects.

One section of EXPEDITE makes state natural resource agencies adhere to rigid timelines for review even if they don't respond to FHWA's invitation to "coordinate." It curtails their rights to review the

Progress for Hartford Ped Safety Bill

In early March, the Connecticut legislature's joint committee on public safety unanimously approved bill #5506, "An act establishing pedestrian safety construction programs." The bill is now before the appropriations committee, where it is also expected to be approved.

The bill would require the Connecticut DOT to spend at least 15% of the funds it receives under the federal "**hazard elimination**" program on "facilities for pedestrians or other nonmotorized means of transportation." The funds can be spent on these types of projects as grants to municipal governments, or by the state on projects that are consistent with the local or metropolitan bicycle and pedestrian plans.

The bill also contains clear, robust definitions of eligible uses of the funds, such as traffic calming.

At its hearing in the public safety committee, the bill was supported by CT Children's Medical Center and CT Fund for the Environment. The Connecticut Bicycle Coalition (CBC) is the organization whose advocacy and research led to the bill's introduction.

The bill was opposed only by **ConnDOT**, who argued that the legislation would **divert funding** from other needs and is unnecessary.

But last fall, the CBC issued a report entitled "Deadly by Design: the CT Department of Transportation's Fatal Neglect of Pedestrian Safety." The paper documented that **pedestrian fatalities** are about **16% of traffic deaths** in the state each year, and that almost none of the \$60 million in federal hazard elimination money spent by the state since 1992 has been directed at pedestrian safety (*MTR* #338). Cities in Connecticut, which have been generally re-built to make life easy for cars, have very high rates of pedestrian fatalities measured against numbers of pedestrian trips and miles walked.

The pedestrian safety bill may face opposition in the legislature's transportation committee, which has a tradition of strong ties to ConnDOT.

News on the bill's status, key legislators and the "Deadly by Design" report are available on-line from the Connecticut Bicycle Coalition: www.ctbike.org

project **according to state laws and regulations**, instead deferring to the definitions, standards and purpose/need statements of the federal agencies.

The legislation represents a **major step back** from the **environmental review process** developed in the United States during the past 30 years. It should be viewed with alarm by environmental and historic preservation advocates in all fields, not just those concerned with transportation.

In 1997, when TEA-21 was being drafted, AASHTO and numerous other highway groups tried to push through offensive streamlining language, but groups around the nation successfully fought off most of the provisions. After Congress determined not to adopt most of the objectionable streamlining provisions offered in TEA-21, studies revealed the real cause of transportation project delay.

Evidence from both FHWA and AASHTO studies show that **delay in project delivery** is most often due to lack of funding or low priority (32.5% of delay), **local controversy** (16%), complexity/no reason given (13%), or to the **complexity of the project** in terms of environmental or historic preservation issues.

Done Right, E. River Tolls Won't Cause Jams

In letters to the editor and politicians comments since Mayor Michael Bloomberg slipped revenue from East River tolls into the out-years of his proposed budget, one of most oft-cited arguments against tolls on the now-free bridges is the traffic jams they would cause in Brooklyn and Queens. "**Even with the use of E-ZPass, there would be traffic back-ups** in and near residential communities such as Williamsburg and Downtown Brooklyn," Brooklyn Borough President Marty Markowitz stated in a February release denouncing tolls.

Such statements reflect this region's initial period of experience with E-ZPass tolling. Generally, E-ZPass readers have been **fitted into old-style toll booths**. In many cases, E-ZPass users have had to share lanes with slower, cash-paying toll customers. The MTA still uses gates requiring E-ZPass users to make full stops at its booths, resulting in backups at crossings like the Queens-Midtown Tunnel.

Such uses of E-ZPass make some sense as transitional, market-building strategies. But E-ZPass technology has significantly greater potential that is only beginning to be tapped. With E-ZPass market share now fairly high, the NJ Turnpike and the Port Authority are leading the region in developing E-ZPass applications where drivers pay tolls by simply passing antennae at **normal driving speeds**. At some points in North America, motorists are already paying tolls at 70mph.

If high-speed E-Z Pass readers were set up on East

River bridges, some motorists would still need or want to pay cash. That still need not require a full-blown toll booth at each of the four bridges. Where a **parallel, cash-capable facility** exists, drivers without E-Z Pass could be directed there (from the Queensboro Bridge, say, to the Queens-Midtown Tunnel). Where East River bridges are very close together, like the Manhattan and Brooklyn Bridges, there would be **no need for cash booths at both**. The city could toll its East River bridges and get away with cash lanes at only the Manhattan and Williamsburg Bridges. Of course, the establishment of high-speed electronic-only bridges would further increase motorists' use of E-ZPass in the region.

A Tax on the Poor?

The traffic jam argument is understandable from people who have always experienced toll collection in the form of traditional toll booths, or at the MTA's gated E-ZPass facilities.

Less worthy of serious debate is the line that bridge tolls would soak the "working stiffs" who must car commute into the Manhattan Central Business District. This red herring is routinely trotted out by AAA and politicians who have never figured out that **most people in New York City don't get around in cars**, that very few of the working poor drive to CBD jobs, and that those who do have ample transit options.

In a recent *Downtown Express*, Lower East Side City Council member Margarita Lopez stated unequivocal opposition to East River tolls, saying they would discriminate against the poor. Aside from representing the typical windshield perspective of a NYC politician, Lopez' opinion betrays profound ignorance of how people travel in New York City. Only about 5% of CBD-destined rush hour trips are made by solo drivers — those who would bear the brunt of a peak-hour East River toll. Unless they receive a subsidy from business or government, these car commuters also likely pay significant parking costs (generally not the province of "working stiffs").

Steven O'Neill of the advocacy group Right-of-Way recently developed a perspective on **income and NYC car ownership** relevant to the debate over who's driving and who would pay tolls. Though available 2000 Census data don't break out car ownership by household income, they do present a close approximation — the proportions of owner and renter households that own cars. Among NYC owner households, 72% own at least one car (and 30% own two or more); but **only 34% of renter households** own a car (and just 5% own more than one).

A city study to clear up the various layers of fog swirling around the toll debate would be a very welcome development.

Rolling Back CT's Bus-Busting Budget

The Connecticut Fund for the Environment (CFE) and bus riders from Hartford and New Haven joined at a press conference last Wednesday to **denounce bus service cuts** made by the state in January.

The bus advocates were joined by State Representative Richard Roy of Milford, who is attempting to **restore the funds** lost by CT Transit's bus division. "We have to help people who rely on buses to get to work and to look for work," Roy said.

One bus rider said that the elimination of her bus to the train station had forced her to commute by car on I-95. "I've cancelled my bus pass and drive everyday," she said. Reducing I-95 congestion in several parts of the state is a policy oft-stated by Connecticut transportation officials.

CFE's Don Strait said the bus cuts flew in the face of studies state and the CT Transportation Strategy Board studies calling for bus service increases.

Hudson-Bergen Light Rail Retains Some of Fall's Big Jump in Riders

Ridership on the Hudson-Bergen light rail line has receded since last fall, when destruction of the downtown PATH line and other transportation dislocations **more than doubled daily ridership to 18,000**. According to NJ Transit, average daily ridership in late February was 11,700, still significantly higher than pre-September levels, which hovered around 8,000.

An extension of the line — which currently runs from Bayonne to Jersey City — will reach **Hoboken Terminal** by next fall. Another phase, into North Bergen, which is fully funded, should be finished by 2005. A third phase, as yet unfunded, will bring the line north through Weehawken and into Bergen County and is expected to be completed around 2010.

As construction continues, the New Jersey State Assembly has expanded the panel charged with oversight of this and other light rail projects. The group, which has had three members since its inception in 1993, will now have five members representing all regions of New Jersey. Panel Chair Joseph Doria, Jr., who is also the Mayor of Bayonne, told the *Jersey Journal* that it would work to promote light rail development throughout the state. Two other Democratic members are Paul Sarlo of Woodbridge and Jack Connors of Camden. Assembly Minority Leader Paul DiGaetano has not yet named the two Republican panel members, according to his office.

The Tri-State Transportation Campaign web site:

www.tstc.org

Amtrak Says it Beat Airlines in 4th Quarter NYC-DC Market

For the first time in its history, Amtrak's ridership in the **NYC-Washington passenger market** was higher than that of airline shuttles. The railroad said that in the last quarter of 2001, its high-speed Acela trains helped it capture 52% of the NYC-Washington combined air and rail market. Amtrak said Acela's success suggests that, with more federal support, a well-maintained and expanded intercity rail service could attract more passengers. However, it remains to be seen how much of the **ridership spike** Amtrak will retain as we move away from Sept. 11.

"This nation spends more money annually on cleaning up roadkill and on salt for snow removal than on passenger rail," outgoing Amtrak president George Warrington told the Associated Press.

Road Plan Didn't Depart with Schundler

Despite big political changes in Jersey City, talk of building a highway through the abandoned **Bergen Arches** rail corridor has not gone away.

Since the Bergen Arches Advisory Board's first meeting last April, highway champion and former Jersey City Mayor Bret Schundler failed in his bid for the governorship. Instead, Glenn Cunningham, who supports using the right-of-way for rail, has become mayor (*MTR* #321). However, recent meetings of the advisory board – which convened again in January after an eight-month hiatus – have still been dominated by discussions of highway construction.

According to a board member, representatives from the New Jersey Dept. of Transportation focused on highway construction during the February meeting. New Jersey Transit representatives supported scenarios that included HOV lane capacity, including a highway or a combination of light rail and an HOV lane. Consultants working for NJ DOT will present project recommendations at a March board meeting.

The Bergen Arches is an abandoned rail line that runs through the heart of Jersey City, near several major roadways, the Hudson-Bergen Light Rail system, NJ Transit and PATH lines and various freight rail lines and yards. After an initial proposal for the project included only highway construction, residents and the Hudson Alliance for Rational Transportation (HART) protested and ensured that a major investment study include transit and other alternatives (*MTR* #319). Though residents are worried by the renewed interest in highway construction, the changes at the top of Jersey City government should facilitate a more evenly balanced debate going forward.

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Calendar

March 19, 6-8pm Public meeting to present final draft of prioritized project proposals for Transportation Enhancement Program. NYC Dept. of City Planning. Spector Hall, 22 Reade Street, Manhattan. 718-482-6327

March 20, 7pm Monthly meeting of CT Metro-North Shore Line East Rail Commuter Council, CDOT Offices, New Haven RR Station www.trainweb.org/ct

March 20, 5-9pm American Society of Highway Engineers, South NJ Section meeting. Carlucci's Restaurant, 140 Centerton Road, Mount Laurel, NJ. 856-663-5550

March 21, noon New York City Transit Riders Council meeting. 347 Madison Avenue, Manhattan. 212-878-7087, mail@pcac.org

March 21, 1pm NY Metropolitan Transportation Council Annual Meeting. U.S. Custom House, One Bowling Green, Manhattan. 718-472-3046

March 21, 8am-2pm NJ Future Forum, "Building Better Communities With Transit, Smart Growth Designs and Planning Strategies." Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy, 33 Livingston Avenue, New Brunswick, NJ. www.njfuture.org or 609-393-0008

March 25, 8am-2pm Bus Rapid Transit in the Route 1 Corridor, Central Jersey Transportation Forum workshop. Sarnoff Corporation, 201 Washington Road, Princeton. 215-238-2872, lmceffer@dvrpc.org

April 26 8am-1:30pm Regional Plan Association Regional Assembly. "Rebuilding Downtown New York." Marriot Marquis, Manhattan. 212-253-2727 x309. www.rpa.org

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

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