

Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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NEWS

Transit Growth Outshines Driving for Fifth Straight Year

Despite New York City growth rates that were lower than in recent years, national transit ridership grew **twice as fast as driving** from 2000 to 2001. Transit use grew 2% nationwide compared a 1% growth in driving, rounding out a five-year leap in transit ridership, according to a Surface Transportation Policy Project analysis released last week. Statistics from the American Public Transportation Association (APTA) show transit use up 21% over the last five years nationwide, while Federal Highway Administration data shows that driving grew by 12%.

In New York City, the nation's largest transit market, bus, ferry and subway use grew by 2.5% for the year, despite seeing no third quarter growth due to system disruptions and a drop-off in travel after September 11. In 2001, 33% of all transit trips nationwide, or 3.175 billion trips, took place in the New York metropolitan region. According to the *Daily News*, New York City subway ridership was at its **highest since 1953** last year, while bus ridership was at a 30-year high. Queens transit services, which were less affected by fall disruptions, showed higher ridership growth. Bus and train ridership on Queens lines — excluding 90 million riders on private buses — grew by 4.2%, according to the *Queens Courier*.

While New York City's booming systems have contributed a high percentage of the nation's transit growth since the mid-1990s, ridership is also growing in more car-dependent markets, such as Orange County, California. Rider growth on NJ's expanding Hudson County light rail system was the highest in the nation in this category, with ridership up 141%. Much of this, however, was due to ridership shifts after the downtown PATH tunnel was destroyed.

APTA attributes ridership growth to higher levels of federal, state and local investment, which makes a good case for further investment in transit. In our region, capital and operating budgets for transit are underfunded in all three states, **constraining service needed to meet burgeoning demand**. Funding programs in next year's federal transportation authorization should reflect this problem, but state governments need to address it directly as well.

Bloomberg's Big Step Back from Traffic Fight

Transportation reformers were left wondering what to make of the Bloomberg administration's transportation priorities after the city abruptly announced the end of the rush hour carpool rule for the Lincoln and Queens-Midtown Tunnels and the Queensboro Bridge last Thursday.

Carpool rule opponents had not waged any overt campaign against it lately, and Mayor Bloomberg and Transportation Commissioner Weinshall had effectively refuted their arguments over the winter.

The city offered no rationale for making the change, or for its timing. A study the city commissioned on the carpool rule's impacts and benefits, for instance, has never seen the light of day. NYC DOT's press release couched the change as a "lifting of restrictions," carrying a "**getting back to normal**" tone that abandons any message about managing traffic congestion and its impacts. The city's release cast maintenance of carpool rules for downtown crossings in "ongoing emergency" language. A city DOT spokesperson told the *Staten Island Advance* that no decision had been made about whether the downtown carpool rule would be made permanent. He said that would depend on "political will," but Thursday's action has left many wondering whose will is at issue.

In the long run, it would make little sense to have a downtown carpool rule but **not apply it to midtown**.

"The city has taken a real step backwards in the fight against traffic congestion. Rebuilding issues aside, traffic congestion imposes a huge economic and quality of life burden on the city," the Tri-State Campaign said in a release. "The carpool rule was the first real step in memory to address that burden, and midtown is certainly the district most afflicted by it."

The midtown crossings move high volumes of traffic. The tunnels and bridge no longer affected by the carpool rule accounted for just under half of pre-September vehicle entries below 62nd Street.

The *NY Times* noted that parking garage owners and others had threatened a lawsuit against the rule. It's unclear that such action was pending, or that the city was not in a defensible position if action was ultimately taken. It may also be possible that, given

the city transportation establishment's traditional devotion to unhindered motorist access and **car commuting elites**, maintenance of the carpool rule created an internal tension that led it to convince itself that some give-back to drivers had to be made.

The City's Missing Message

With the move and its accompanying rhetoric, the Bloomberg administration missed an opportunity to signal long-term interest in relieving congestion and the environmental, economic and quality of life burdens too many cars and trucks bring with them.

To the extent that there was a compelling political reason to change the rule, a better plan than easing it according to geography would have been to simply allow single-occupant vehicles back on the tolled crossings, but **not the free ones**. The message could then still be delivered in terms of congestion management: "to drive into Manhattan at rush hour, you **either double up or pay**." Because the city is re-instituting the pre-Sept. 11th HOV lanes on the Queensboro Bridge, the only difference between such a policy and what the city has actually implemented are a few standard Queensboro Bridge traffic lanes.

Will they, and tolled access at the Midtown Tunnel, be enough to **satisfy the carpool rule's critics** over the long run? We doubt it, and predict the city's

Staten Island Expressway Study: Bus Lane?

NY State DOT officials told the *Staten Island Advance* earlier this month that the Staten Island Expressway major investment study would recommend **bus-only lanes** along the highway's median. The news is consistent with statements DOT made over a year ago, but it now appears more official given that the study will be wrapped up within a few weeks.

The officials told the paper that **new highway lanes** would be **counterproductive** on Staten Island. "If you build it, everyone will come," said Doug Currey, NYC regional director for the State DOT.

However, the article said the DOT was still grappling with the issue of whether the **bus lane would allow carpools**, single occupancy cars that have paid a toll or even trucks during off-hours, again raising the issue of what NYSDOT means when it says "bus lane" (see *MTR* #273). A true busway along the expressway could provide the spine for a Staten Island rapid bus system and be a strong complement to the Gowanus HOV-3 lane. The study will also apparently recommend expressway truck climbing lanes at Todt Hill, a continuous service road along most of the expressway, a new West Shore Expressway-SIE interchange and ramp metering along the expressway's length.

approach will encourage them to take aim at the Williamsburg Bridge before long.

Toll Agencies Could Step Up Where City Leaves Off

In January, the Port Authority indicated interest in developing more permanent HOV or bus-only capacity at the Lincoln Tunnel (*MTR* #347). Hopefully, the city's removal of the carpool rule there will spur the Port Authority to action.

With the carpool rule off at the Midtown Tunnel, another consideration over the not-very-long term is whether the **MTA** will match the PA's **congestion pricing** system. If the MTA announces toll and fare hikes after the fall election, it would be the time to introduce peak and off-peak rates. If off-peak tolls rise little or not at all, the plan could be more palatable to drivers than an across-the-board hike.

NY Transit Fares Loom as 2002 Issue

Transport Workers Union Local 100 will hold a major rally outside the MTA's Manhattan headquarters Monday afternoon. The union is billing the event as a first step in its contract negotiations with the agency this year.

The contract negotiations will take place against the backdrop of a \$250 million **transit budget deficit** that is projected to grow over time, and transit ridership that is still growing and demands more service. The MTA's financial status is such that it may require fare and toll increases in 2003 even without a new labor agreement. *Newsday's* transit columnist Ray Sanchez spotlighted the looming fare issue last week, noting that Governor Pataki's "no hike" pledge is likely to expire in mid-November.

The Straphangers Campaign's Gene Russianoff told Sanchez that "The larger issue that I would like to see engaged in the gubernatorial election is **how do we find the resources to maintain the transit system**, expand it and hold fares at affordable levels...The challenge for the Democrats [in the Governor's race] on this is to say why anything would be different if they got elected."

TransAction Wrap-Up:

Smart Transportation, Growth for NJ

Smart growth and efficient transportation planning emerged as the unofficial theme at last week's "TransAction" – **New Jersey's huge annual transportation conference** for transportation officials, contractors, activists, engineers and planners.

Organized by county transportation officials, the conference had over 1,000 people in attendance on Tuesday, the main day, with one notable exception. New state transportation commissioner **James Fox**, who would usually give the keynote speech, was

absent, detailed away by Governor James McGreevey to Washington, D.C. for the day. Assemblyman Alex DeCroce and Morris County DOT director Frank Reilly emceed the ceremonies.

In stark contrast to the ground-up movement demonstrated throughout the conference, DOT's keynote speech, by Deputy Commissioner Jack Lettiere, was a finger-wagging lecture suggesting that NJ DOT was going to speed up its 7-plus year project pipeline by getting obstacles out of the way as quickly as possible. However, the conference's agenda and attendees showed that New Jersey officials are not just thinking, but are actively planning infrastructure projects and development that can only be characterized as smart growth — around ports, cities, town and village centers, transit stops and rail freight lines.

Some highlights:

New Attitudes Toward Freight: Union County has issued a "Global Freight Village" plan, seeking direct access for trucks to the truck-only lanes of the NJ Turnpike, and made several presentations on port growth and County efforts to accommodate mixed uses, trucks, transit and other development along the eastern shore brownfields. Class I railroads are continuing their push to get more trucks off the road, and gave an update on progress and investment needs. The new director of the NJ Motor Truck Association said newer truck engines coming on line are even less polluting than trains, and claimed that, for the most part, heavy, large truck operators would much rather stay on wider, faster "National Network" highways that befit them than ply inappropriate local roads.

Smart Growth Case Studies: Burlington County discussed several smart growth projects along the stops of the new southern NJ light rail line and Rt. 130, which hold promise way to revive river towns that declined after I-295 was built. Housing and recreational properties planned near rail stations in Bayonne, Jersey City and Camden were also presented by NJ Transit and South Jersey officials.

Bicycle and Pedestrian Projects: Bicycle and pedestrian advocates and municipal planners were treated to two days' worth of project updates that show real promise for getting more people out of cars for regular commutes and recreational trips.

Newark's chief traffic planner outlined a comprehensive plan to invest in scores of connected bicycle paths, some off-road and some on-road, connecting neighborhoods, parks, employment and entertainment destinations, major institutions, schools and colleges. Newark officials also said work was about to begin on \$1.6 million worth of sidewalk reconstruction and traffic calming on Broad Street, replacing a center land with a landscaped median for pedestrian refuge.

More Tricks from NJ's Permanent Government

When NJ Transit implemented its April 1 fare hikes, the agency also redefined its peak travel times, canceling the **25% round-trip discount** for many riders. NJ Transit wanted to eliminate the discount for round-trip off-peak rides altogether when it proposed fare hikes in January. But the element was supposedly dropped after public opposition. The Campaign and other advocates criticized loss of the discount because it would have discouraged occasional riders, many of whom have the option of driving.

Instead of living up to the deal, NJ Transit has instead **added five hours to its definition of peak** travel times, when riders do not get a round-trip discount. Prior to April 1, peak hours were defined as 6:30 to 9:30 am. Now, according to NJ Transit schedules, off-peak discounts are not valid during the morning peak hour from "approximately 5:45 am to 10 am" and during the afternoon peak times of "approximately 4 pm to 8:15 am."

The change was blasted by the *Daily News* last week, which said "the agency is sneakier than you suppose." NJ Transit was heavily criticized in January for making it difficult for the public to comment on its proposals — scheduling public hearings the day after the New Year holiday, all at the same time of day (not accommodating different schedules).

Brooklyn Calls for Stronger Traffic Calming

In response to a New York City Dept. of Transportation proposal for its "Downtown Brooklyn Traffic Calming Project," Brooklyn community leaders have called for **more assertive traffic calming** measures and more local involvement. The \$6 million project, funded by federal anti-pollution grants, was first announced in 1998 and lauded as an innovation pilot program. However, DOT's proposals have so far been modest and have lacked innovation.

Brooklyn Community Board 6, representing Carroll Gardens/South Brooklyn, Cobble Hill, Columbia Street District, Gowanus, Park Slope and Red Hook, issued a resolution this month outlining specific projects it would like to see on city streets. The Board urged DOT to consider **street redesign elements** such as sidewalk extensions or "neckdowns" to narrow crosswalk distances and slow turning traffic, "gateway" treatments that narrow entrances to streets to **discourage through traffic and trucks** and bus bulbs that extend across the curb lane so buses need not pull in and out of traffic. The board also called for pedestrian-only signal phases and for a leading "walk" phase that gives pedestrians a head start over turning vehicles. It also wants more street plantings, tinted concrete in crosswalks and more intensive

traffic calming near public institutions.

The city has proposed a mild set of sidewalk widenings, wider medians and retiming of traffic signals.

The Community Board also told DOT that the community wants to be involved in decisions on traffic calming projects prior to implementation, so design considerations can be discussed and developed locally. In the past, community groups have criticized DOT for ignoring their concerns about this project (MTR #'s 224, 330).

White Plains Bike Route Plan Under Attack

A plan to install 200 "bike route" signs on White Plains streets is under attack by pro-car members of the city's Traffic Commission. The signs would be installed on local streets, including Mamaroneck, Bryant and Hamilton Avenues, directing cyclists to the train station, shopping centers, recreational areas, parks and other key destinations. According to the *Journal News*, a \$14,000 federal Community Development Block Grant would pay for the signs.

City Councilman William King initiated the plan as a step to reduce car traffic and gasoline consumption, after the city administration turned down his idea to create **designated bike lanes**. He told the *Journal News* that the signs would provide some protection by reminding drivers that cyclists are also on the road.

Many of White Plains' streets are engineered more like highways than city or town streets that invite users other than motorists.

Opponents of the plan, including **Traffic Commission Chairman Robert Levine**, told the paper they oppose the signs because there was no public discussion about their installation. However, critics' two main complaints hold little water. One argument is that they create a danger to cyclists by not marking designated bike lanes. Indeed, many cyclists find "bike route" signs fairly useless, absent any real improvement to street designs. The point then is to **implement the bike lanes**. Critics also say that plan will clutter the landscape – but 200 additional signs would hardly be noticeable among the city's 12,000 other traffic signs.

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



Mobilizing the Region

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Calendar

April 23, 8:30am-2pm Women's City Club. "NY Rebuilds: Are We Getting It Right?" NYC Planning Comm'r Amanda Burden, former Comptroller Alan Hevesi, RPA's Bob Yaro. 212-353-8070

April 23, 6-8 pm Auto-Free NY meeting, "Transportation Choices for Cleaner Air." Andy Darrell, Environmental Defense. NYPD Downtown Center, 104 Washington Street, Manhattan. 212-475-3394 or geohaikalis@juno.com

April 23, 6-9pm Southern Brooklyn Transportation Investment Study public meeting. Lafayette High School. Benson Avenue & Bay 43rd Street, Brooklyn. 212-799-8803x22 or SouthernBrooklynTIS@zetlin.com

April 23, 6:30-8:30pm Congestion Buster Task Force public meeting. NJDOT Multi-Purpose Room, 1035 Parkway Avenue, Ewing, NJ. 609-530-2038 or cbtf@dot.state.nj.us

April 24, 2-4pm Congestion Buster Task Force public meeting. NJDOT Cherry Hill Office, One Executive Campus, Route 70 West, Cherry Hill, NJ. 609-530-2038 or cbtf@dot.state.nj.us

April 24, 6-9pm Southern Brooklyn Transportation Investment Study public meeting. High School of Telecommunications, 360-76 St., Brooklyn. 212-799-8803x22 or SouthernBrooklynTIS@zetlin.com

April 24, 6:30 pm East River Bridge Tolls Debate, Puffin Room gallery public forum. Puffin Room Gallery, 435 Broome Street, Manhattan. 212-343-2881, puffin-room@earthlink.net

April 25, 12-2pm NYC Transit Riders Council meeting, 420 Lexington Avenue, 11th Floor, Manhattan. 212-878-7087.

April 25-26 Project for Public Spaces Course. "How to Turn a Place Around." 212-620-5660 or hfesting@pps.org

April 26, 8am-noon Regional Plan Association Assembly, "Rebuilding Downtown NY" New York Marriot Marquis, Manhattan. 212-253-2727, www.rpa.org

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