

# Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

Number 366

May 20, 2002

## NEWS

### NJ's E-ZPass Debacle Could Mean Higher Tolls

According to New Jersey lawmakers, the state's projected \$469 million debt for installing the E-Z Pass system on its toll roads could be **passed on to drivers** before 2008, when bonds for the project are due. Both Assemblyman John Wisniewski, chairman of the Transportation Committee, and Assemblyman Alex DeCroce told press the state would not default.

"Tolls may go up, projects may not get done, and that's not what anyone bargained for," Wisniewski told the *Bergen Record*. "The accident has already happened ... the money has to come from somewhere." Assemblyman Anthony DeCroce told the paper, "We're not defaulting. What may happen is (the toll road agencies) might have to raise revenues. We can't forecast that." DeCroce defended the E-ZPass system and told the *Trenton Times* that it might not rack up as much debt as some project.

Governor James McGreevey was right to suspend further E-ZPass installations after taking office. New Jersey had originally planned on fines from toll cheaters paying for the system, but it is clear that the state vastly over-estimated fines as a revenue source.

While financing the New Jersey E-ZPass system clearly has to be reworked, today's problems are **not an argument against electronic toll collection**. Short term fixes like eliminating E-ZPass discounts will hurt progress against traffic congestion over the long run. Canceling destructive, traffic generating projects like the **Turnpike's Route 92 plan** would be a better source of savings for NJ toll roads.

There is a way that New Jersey can come out of today's E-ZPass fiscal meltdown ahead of the game. Keep the E-ZPass installation freeze on for now. But in crafting a workable financing plan, build in the development of **non-stop** electronic toll collection facilities, especially where barrier tolls disrupt traffic flow on highway main-lines. Today's E-ZPass technology can deduct tolls at **normal highway speeds**.

The Garden State Parkway has already begun looking into such a system, and says it can be done. NJ's toll road agencies and DOT should concentrate their efforts on deploying high-speed E-ZPass on as many toll roads as possible and getting rid of the antiquated toll booths. Any other long-term plan would be a waste of money.

### Two Approaches to Waterfronts

At the Metropolitan Waterfront Alliance conference last week, NJ Governor Jim McGreevey said "our future is tied to clean water and healthy natural resources," and that "urban waterfronts need to be the centerpiece of smart growth." He promised to expand rail and ferry transportation to reduce congestion and improve waterfront access. He said state funds were being used to identify gaps in the Hudson River Walkway, develop the East Coast Greenway and for other public waterfront projects.

But other plans mentioned by McGreevey mentioned indicated that he thinks **highways** are also appropriate **for waterfront access** — he noted the state's investment in the **Bergen Arches** highway in Jersey City, and in "Portway," a huge planned truck route which may bring heavy trucks and associated warehousing to the Meadowlands, and **cut off access to waterfronts** in Newark, Jersey City, Elizabeth, Linden and Kearny.

McGreevey's speech followed a presentation by the Tri-State Transportation Campaign which detailed NJ DOT's waterfront construction of highways, such as Rt 21 (Passaic River) and Rt 29 (Delaware River).

Mayor Bloomberg later noted that "for too long, New York City ringed its waterfront with highways, cement and cars" and said that "these **highways and their traffic presented an obstacle** to waterfront access." He mentioned several park efforts he's been involved with, including the Brooklyn Bridge and Hudson River Parks. He said, "We are removing those obstacles and providing access to the waterfront, pedestrian access, while moving the highways away from the waterfronts." Willie Studioso, who spent years maintaining access for Brooklynites to the India Street pier in Greenpoint against the odds, and sometimes, the law, was heartily congratulated by the mayor, who gave him a "hero of the Harbor" award.

### NJ Transit: Trenton Steals the Fare Hike

The \$9.6 million raised by NJTransit's recent fare hike will be used to finance general state programs, not to maintain or improve transit service, as state leaders promised riders last winter.

According to the *Bergen Record*, NJTransit will receive \$5.6 million less in operating funding from the state this year and an additional \$4 million origi-

nally intended to ease bus overcrowding in Bergen County will not be administered.

In essence, **NJ Transit riders** have been singled out for a **tax increase** to meet the state's fiscal shortfall. The portion of NJTransit's budget that comes through the farebox, which was already one of the highest nationwide, has now reached a new high.

In statements to the *Record*, a NJ Dept of Transportation spokesman lamely explained that, since the agency did not anticipate revenue from a fare hike when it prepared its 2002 budget, programs and services will not be affected by the lost state funding.

This is a sharp departure from the agency's pre-fare hike "emergency" rhetoric. Then-NJTransit chief

### Hanley Moves Up in the ATU

Larry Hanley, president of the Staten Island's Amalgamated Transit Union Local 726 since 1987, has been promoted to a job in the ATU's international organization.

Hanley is not only an outspoken labor and political activist, but is also one of New York City's **most successful transit advocates**. Hanley's agitation for an express bus fare reduction in the mid-1990s struck a chord in Staten Island and city-wide. The **fare was reduced** from \$4 to \$3 when the Pataki Administration introduced its MetroCard fare discounts 1997. Express bus ridership in the city has since doubled.

Local 726 worked with the Tri-State Campaign to increase the access standard on the **Gowanus Expressway HOV lane**, because cars in the lane slowed bus service from Staten Island to Manhattan. City and state officials recently boosted the standard from two-per-car to three-per-car, speeding travel on the key bus route.

"Our local has really done what no other local union has done, in that we've built a coalition and unselfishly went out and said we're going to work on behalf of the public interest," Hanley told the Staten Island *Advance*. Hanley will reportedly remain on Staten Island, but will work on issues that concern the ATU throughout the U.S. and Canada. Local 726's loss will be the broader ATU's gain.

"Larry Hanley is a phenomenal labor leader, a combination of a Michael Quill and P.T. Barnum. He achieved miracles, like lowering the fare for express bus riders and increasing service. He's always found ways to join the interest of transit workers with the riders and he's a lot of fun to work with," said the Straphangers Campaign's Gene Russianoff.

Jeffrey Warsh told the *Record* in January that post-Sept. 11 budget strains necessitated rapid action on a fare hike. "If there was a provision in the statute for an emergency fare increase, I've got to believe that that would be implemented at this point," he said.

NJTransit officials also told press and transit riders last winter that they would seek **more money from the state** to fund operations, rounding out a long-term plan that did not place the brunt of the agency's fiscal burden on the backs of riders.

Then-state transportation commissioner James Weinstein told the *Star-Ledger* in December that a fare hike, "isn't going to solve [the budget gap], but it will pay for a portion of it. We'll still have to talk about increasing state subsidies and increased capital investment in the system." Now, this year, the state has gone the other way and reduced its support for transit. "It's fraud on the voters and certainly a fraud against transit riders," Tri-State Campaign director Janine Bauer told the *Record*. "No matter what excuse you use to raise money from riders and taxpayers, like saying we need new trains, if we give them more money they take it, and **we never get better service**. We're totally fed up."

### NYC's Bike Week

Last week marked Bike Week in New York City, sponsored by Transportation Alternatives and the NYC DOT. Among many events, borough presidents hosted bike commuter breakfasts, and city and state officials dedicated a part of Manhattan's West Side greenway (a ceremony postponed from last fall).

The *Daily News'* **Gridlock Sam** Schwarz devoted his Q&A section for the week to answering bike transport questions. Sam reminded that it is illegal for occupants of a motor vehicle to open doors into the paths of moving bike riders. He also pointed out that cyclists do not have to use a bicycle lane on a street if it is obstructed or if they are preparing to turn. **NYPD** traffic enforcement officers have been **misapplying the bike lane law** in Midtown recently.

Census data from 2000 suggest an 56% increase in cycling's share of commuting in NY State. Recent census supplementary data suggest as large or even greater increase in NYC. More municipal-level data from the decennial census is due for release soon.

### Transit: Is NYC #1 ?

Other North American cities' mass transit systems cannot rival the NY region's in scale. But a recent look at transit innovations in San Francisco raises big issues of leadership in quality and innovation. The list of **good things happening in S.F.** includes many of the policies and features one reads about in news articles here every few years. But here, the innova-

The Tri-State Transportation Campaign web site:

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

tion is grudgingly discussed by transit managers as something that may be possible in some hazy future.

San Francisco has incorporated a **“transit first” policy** into its city charter. It directs city government to continuously use transit-priority measures on city streets to help speed buses and light rail cars. New York City features the slowest urban transit buses in the U.S., and bus lanes that often perform poorly.

San Francisco is getting ready to build the Third Street light rail project, a **major addition to the Muni rail system** that will replace a bus corridor with heavy ridership. New York City is having trouble deciding what its transit expansion priorities are, and doesn't have money in hand to pay for them. Some, like Mayor Bloomberg, would rather serve trips to new development before improving service in terribly crowded corridors. Even the relatively inexpensive “surface subway” rapid bus project for Manhattan's East Side proposed by the mayor during last year's campaign is far from the drawing board.

The “transit first” provisions in the S.F. city charter require developers to build near mass transit and limit parking, or pay into a transit account if they do not. In New York, the fastest growing area is Staten Island, and recent Dept. of City Planning zoning recommendations called for proportionately more parking in Manhattan developments.

San Francisco's Muni **transit agency and city traffic department** are **scheduled to merge** this July. “Putting the responsibility for all street traffic under one umbrella should help transit movement throughout the city,” Muni chief Michael Burns recently told *Mass Transit* magazine. In New York, the weak relationship between NYC Transit and NYC DOT gives us streets renowned for gridlock and snail-paced bus trips (during his campaign, Mayor Bloomberg urged that NYC Transit be returned to city control).

San Francisco is getting ready to install “NextBus” digital signs offering real-time information at its shelters system-wide. “People don't mind waiting for a bus if they know how long it's going to be...It's ideal for businesses near the bus stops. Riders can sit comfortably over there sipping coffee knowing it's nine minutes before the bus comes,” says Burns. Similar NYC Transit systems for buses and subways appear to be far off.

To be sure, New York and NYC Transit have done the heavy lifting to **rebuild vast and aging subway and commuter rail systems** since they fell into ruin in the 1970s, and changes like MetroCard fare discounts have made transit in New York much more convenient and attractive to use over the past five years. New York boasts valuable institutional ar-

rangements that other systems envy, like the transfer of bridge and tunnel toll revenue to transit. But New York seems **unsure of how to build on its transit successes** of the 1990s. San Francisco's “transit first” policies, adoption of planning and technology to make its rail lines and buses increasingly reliable and convenient and efforts to get land use in synch with transit may be showing us how it's done.

### Stamford Business Leaders Tackle Traffic

In an effort to address the traffic plaguing Stamford commuters, the city's Chamber of Commerce wants to start a pilot program for shuttles running **between the train station and office buildings**. Congestion in the area is so bad it has become a top business community concern, according to the *Advocate*.

A May 5 editorial in the *Advocate* worried that if the situation did not improve, some **businesses would move** and others would stay away. “...It says a lot that, as corporate layoffs continue and state officials struggle with a two-year budget gap estimated at \$1.7 billion, the state of highway traffic in southwestern Connecticut continues to be topic No. 1 for Stamford's business community,” the paper wrote.

Stamford is the only major city in Connecticut to significantly add jobs and population during the past 20 years. Most new growth in the state is in suburbs, worsening gridlock, land consumption and pollution.

In order to assess why they drive, the Stamford Chamber surveyed its members on workforce commuting. It has now begun to concentrate its efforts on train-to-office commutes, where it feels it can make a difference. The Chamber's transportation committee has also met with CT Transit to reduce transfer delays and expand shuttle service. The agency was able to quickly provide a new shuttle bus route.

While the shuttle program is an important start, businesses can reinforce its use with **workplace incentives**. California companies have had success reducing rates of car commuting with parking “cash-out” strategies, where workers who agree not to drive are offered the cash value of the parking space provided at the workplace. Companies across the country chip in for worker transit passes, or offer the federal transit commuting tax benefit program (called TransitChek in NY, Deduct-a-Ride in CT). Maryland now provides tax incentives for businesses that implement such “commuter choice” measures.

### Connecticut DOT, Lawmakers Oppose Safe Routes for Kids

Legislation that would have provided funding for pedestrian and bicycle safety projects, especially on children's routes to schools, died before the Connecti-

cut legislative session ended last week. The measure, which was added as an amendment to a general transportation budget bill, would have utilized federal "hazard elimination" funding for bicycle and pedestrian safety projects and to create a "Safe Routes to School" program in CT (MTR #363).

Although the amendment had bi-partisan sponsorship in both houses, **opposition by the Connecticut Department of Transportation** hurt its chances with key legislators. The amendment failed to make it out of budget committee. Reportedly, Conn DOT agreed to fund a Safe Routes to School project in Norwich.

A budget provision to restore CT Transit bus operating funds cut last year by Governor Rowland is in limbo with the rest of the state budget until lawmakers reconvene in June.

### Long Island Sees Second Round of Traffic Calming Grants

Unlike Connecticut, New York does use some of its federal safety funding for traffic calming. Governor Pataki announced earlier this month a new list of projects that the NY State Dept. of Transportation will fund via its Long Island "**Local Safe Streets and Traffic Calming Program.**" The funding program, which is in its second year, provides \$2 million in grants for traffic calming projects on Long Island.

According to a release from the Governor's office, new grants have been awarded to the Town of Oyster Bay, the Villages of Great Neck Plaza and Russell Gardens, the City of Glen Cove, and Plandome Manor. Only one application was turned down for funding this year. Last year, the DOT granted \$2.7 million to eight local governments, funding half of the 17 local governments that applied (MTR #320). The program was better promoted in its first year. The latest application process also coincided with the general distraction caused by the Sept. 11 attacks. The Campaign intends to work with the Dept. to boost the level of applications this year.

The Campaign proposed the traffic calming funding idea to the NY State DOT in 1998, while helping Long Island media emphasize pedestrian dangers (MTR #224). The program was instituted in 2000. New Jersey also uses a portion of aid to municipalities for bike and pedestrian safety and infrastructure.

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



Mobilizing the Region

MTR#366 Contributing: Janine Bauer Editors: Jon Orcutt, Lisa Peterson Executive Director, Janine Bauer

240 West 35th Street #801, New York, NY 10001 tel. (212) 268-7474 fax (212) 268-7333 [tstc@tstc.org](mailto:tstc@tstc.org)

## Calendar

**May 21, 3-9pm** Kosciuszko Bridge Project public meeting. St. Cecilia's Roman Catholic Church, 84 Herbert Street, Brooklyn. 718-482-4683 or [kosciuszko@gw.dot.state.ny.us](mailto:kosciuszko@gw.dot.state.ny.us)

**May 21, 6:30-8:30** Smart Growth Task Force Public Visioning Session for the Metropark/Arthur Kill/Raritan Estuary and Bay Region of Middlesex County. Rutgers Labor Education Center, Ryders Lane and Clifton Avenue, New Brunswick. 732-745-4167

**May 22, 6-9pm** Southern Brooklyn Transportation Investment Study public meeting. Lafayette High School, Benson Avenue & Bay 43rd Street, Brooklyn. 212-799-8803x22 or [SouthBrooklynTIS@zetlin.com](mailto:SouthBrooklynTIS@zetlin.com)

**May 23, 6-9pm** Southern Brooklyn Transportation Investment Study public meeting. Montauk Intermediate School, 4200 16th Avenue, Brooklyn. 212-799-8803x22 or [SouthBrooklynTIS@zetlin.com](mailto:SouthBrooklynTIS@zetlin.com)

**May 23, noon-2pm** New York City Transit Riders Council meeting, 347 Madison Avenue, 5th Floor Board Room. 212-878-7087 or [mail@pcac.org](mailto:mail@pcac.org)

**May 28, 6-8pm** Auto-Free New York meeting, "Implementing Bus Rapid Transit in NYC," Bruce Schaller, Schaller Consulting. NYOD Downtown Center, 104 Washington St., Manhattan. 212-475-3394 or [geo-haikalis@juno.com](mailto:geo-haikalis@juno.com)

**June 5, 4:30pm** Public Hearing regarding federal funding proposals for MTA and its subsidiaries. MTA Headquarters Board Room, 5th Floor, 347 Madison Avenue, Manhattan. 212-878-7483

**June 10, 1pm** North Jersey Planning Authority meeting. NJTPA Headquarters, One Newark Center, 17th Floor, Newark. 973-639-8400 or [della@njpta.org](mailto:della@njpta.org)

**June 12-14** NY Public Transit Association Spring Conference, Saratoga Springs. NYPTA: 518-434-9060 or [nypta@atdial.net](mailto:nypta@atdial.net)

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