

Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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NEWS

Groups Call for Suffolk Fare Reduction

Five Long Island civic groups and the Tri-State Campaign urged Suffolk County Executive **Robert Gaffney** to rescind the county's recent bus fare hike in a letter last week. Gaffney committed to reducing the fare hike in an April letter to the Campaign, writing, "When the additional State Transit Operating Assistance (STOA) becomes available, the county will rescind the fare increase." Suffolk County increased bus fares in February, saying it could not rely on promises of state aid (*MTR* #350), although State Senate Transportation Committee Chair **Cesar Trunzo** said he could find the money needed to make up the bus system's deficit.

The groups' letter noted that the recently passed state budget had retained the **increased levels of transit support** proposed by Governor Pataki.

"Rescinding the fare hike will send a message to Albany that reasonable levels of state investment in mass transit can keep services affordable and attractive." Gaffney's office has not made any statement about bus fares since the state budget was approved.

Drivers Decry Demise of Midtown Carpool Rule

Last Monday, Channel 7 News ran a feature piece on the adverse affects of Mayor Bloomberg's decision to suspend the Manhattan carpool rule for river crossings into Midtown. Joe Nolan, Channel 7's metro traffic reporter, said he's observed **more congestion** not only on the Midtown crossings, but also on the **streets of Manhattan** since the carpool rule was lifted. "How much easier was it to get around Manhattan when they weren't allowing one person per car coming in? It was a piece of cake," he said. "Now it's getting back to the same old gridlock traffic."

One driver at the Lincoln Tunnel said, "I got in much faster," when the carpool rule was in effect. Another confirmed that congestion was far worse now. A bus driver also complained that his route is much slower without the carpool rule. "They should have left it on two passengers," he said. "It would have been a lot better for traffic and air pollution."

John Kaehny of Transportation Alternatives and Jon Orcutt of the Campaign said a permanent carpool rule could improve traffic and life in Midtown.

NJ Legislators Question DOT Priorities

New Jersey transportation commissioner James Fox told state legislators last week that "Every bridge that is ready to be repaired is being repaired next year." The somewhat circular statement neglected to mention that that number is **just three bridges** statewide that will be repaired with state transportation Trust Fund monies. All other bridges being fixed are largely or totally funded with federal bridge or "earmark" funds, which can be spent nowhere else.

Fox spoke in response to questions from budget committee legislators about the NJ Dept. of Transportation's **lack of progress and commitment** to the 2000 Trust Fund renewal law's fix-it-first mandate.

State Senator Bernard Kenny asked for the administration's position on an budget amendment to reallocate \$20 million to bridge and roadway preservation from "statewide line items," which now comprise 76% of state highway spending in this year's DOT budget proposal. Fox said "I couldn't spend it because no other bridges are ready for construction."

This sad state of affairs is what prompted the Tri-State Campaign to seek a **budget amendment to reallocate** priorities within the Trust Fund capital program for 2003, to ensure that more bridge and pavement repair projects move into the construction pipeline next year. Year after year, DOT claims it does not have fix-it projects ready to build but starves these areas of the funds needed to get projects ready.

Of the \$580 million that DOT will receive from the Trust Fund in 2003, only \$21.3 million will be spent to repair bridges and \$78.7 million to repair roads. An alarming **76% of the department's program**, or \$440 million, is dedicated to "statewide line items" – projects that are not identified and give complete spending discretion to NJ DOT.

Senator Joseph Kyrillos Jr. queried NJ Transit director George Warrington closely about the McGreevey plan to **reduce operating support for Transit** by the same amount as the agency will raise this year from its recent fare increase (see *MTR* #366). Kyrillos said the agency would have a hard time justifying further increases if the money simply disappears into the general fund.

Questions about DOT's inadequate maintenance

effort were accompanied by questions about weak spending on rail freight and pedestrian projects, and NJTransit's seeming inability to overcome crowding. The questions came from a bi-partisan group of legislators, including Bonnie Watson-Coleman, Francis Blee and Thomas H. Kean Jr. in the Assembly and Wayne Bryant, Bernard Kenny, Barbara Buono, Leonard Lance, Walter Kavanuagh, Martha Bark and Barbara Buono in the Senate.

Paper Pummels McGreevey, DOT on Bridges

The proposal to dedicate more money for road and bridge repair in New Jersey was also supported by a Monday *Home News Tribune* editorial, which reproached DOT for "**breaking the law** and its pact with New Jerseyans" and writing "Gov. James E. McGreevey and the Legislature must act decisively — and swiftly — to rein in the **excuse-making, free-lancing agency.**"

The paper wrote: "... the department's attempts at self-exoneration are **insulting to the public** and its representatives in Trenton in light of the forceful and explicit goals delivered three years ago.

"DOT officials acknowledge the state's bridges are in sorry shape and getting worse. Still there is **no plan** to meet their charge within any period of time.

"Three years have passed. Are the department's best and brightest serious? Clearly not.

"Meanwhile, McGreevey promised in his campaign for governor to make the DOT comply with the fix-it-first mandate. It's time for him to pony up. A rewrite of DOT's capital-spending strategy is necessary and urgent, and he's the one to make it happen," the editorial concluded.

Bloomberg Continues to Trim Car Perks

New York City Mike Bloomberg has made good on his promise to curb city spending for driving privileges, reducing the number of **city-issued parking permits** and further trimming the city's car fleet. Soon after taking office, Mayor Bloomberg ordered all city agencies to reduce their vehicle fleets by 30%. Now, according to the *NY Post*, the Mayor has asked all agencies to further reduce their number of vehicles by 10% by the end of this year.

Despite protest from some city workers, the Mayor has also kept his promise to reduce by 30% the number of parking permits issued by City Hall (*MTR* #351). This is progress as far as it goes. However, a 1999 *Daily News* investigation found that city police and fire departments and the Board of Education house virtual printing presses for another class of **local parking permits** whose total number no one even knows, but may be over 100,000. It's unclear if the mayor's order affects this group of permits.

Paying More of Their Way

The Bloomberg Administration has gotten off to a good start in seeking more **traffic-related revenue** (*MTR* #363) as the city struggles with its deficit. The city has ended an anachronistic Sunday parking meter exemption on part of Manhattan's East Side, and proposes higher parking ticket fines, higher rates for parking in city garages, higher towing fees and higher truck parking fees in Midtown Manhattan. The NYC DOT projects it will collect \$4.3 million more next year than it did this year thanks to these measures.

Still to come are potentially bigger targets: East River bridge tolls and a crackdown on the city's **epidemic of dangerous driving.**

Police officials on Staten Island have already launched a model campaign against speeders, red-light runners and motorists violating cell phone and seat belt rules. The move was spurred by a recent rash of fatal crashes in the borough, and by an increase in road-related deaths from 2000 to 2001.

City Council member Michael McMahon from the North Shore urged cops to do even more. "We've got to get them to **address it like a major crime.** Speeding is often seen casually, like what's the big deal? Everybody does it. No. If you drive aggressively and kill someone, that's criminally negligent homicide," McMahon told the *Advance*.

Sidewalk Cyclists: Scourge or Scapegoat?

Meanwhile, the new City Council leadership seems to have more marginal and disproportionate "old Council" priorities in mind. Speaker Gifford Miller has introduced a bill that would create penalties for cyclists who ride on sidewalks that are far **stiffer than fines for motorists** who jump curbs or **hurt pedestrians** while pulling through a curb cut. According to Transportation Alternatives, motorists driving on city sidewalks kill an average of ten pedestrians and injure another 100 each year. In contrast, bicyclists have not killed one pedestrian and have injured a about 200 pedestrians in the past several years.

Under the new legislation, cyclists who ride on sidewalks but hurt no one could face **misdemeanor charges** (creating a criminal record), **jail time** and fines up to \$500. Motorists who actually injure pedestrians on the sidewalk face infraction charges, a \$55 fine and no jail time.

"Today's amendments...[represent] grossly excessive punishments for cyclists who ride on the sidewalk," Transportation Alternatives' Noah Budnick said at a recent hearing about the legislation. "Increased and regular enforcement in problem neighborhoods, not draconian punishments, is necessary to quell sidewalk cycling."

See www.transalt.org for more information.

Bush Administration Champions Road Building...

In testimony before the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure last week, Federal Highway Administrator **Mary Peters** outlined the Bush Administration's plan for reducing congestion: **build more highways**. The committee's hearing, aimed at identifying strategies for relieving congestion, was sixth in a series on the reauthorization of the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century.

Two key themes that emerged from Peters' testimony were adding highway capacity and **"streamlining" the environmental review process** for transportation projects. "Unless we manage highway congestion, our nation will continue to incur economic costs in forgone productivity, wasted fuel, and a reduced quality of life," Peters said. "Strategic expansion of our transportation system capacity is necessary in certain instances to address our existing and growing mobility needs."

High Ridership Delays Secaucus Transfer Opening

The Secaucus Transfer station, which will tie together eleven New Jersey train lines, will not open at the end of this year as planned, according to the *Bergen Record*. NJTransit fears that crowded lines running to Penn Station NY, which have added over **10,000 new passengers** since the downtown PATH line was destroyed, cannot handle additional riders.

A NJTransit spokesman said that the most significant factor in timing the transfer station's opening will be construction of the temporary downtown PATH station. That could delay Secaucus' opening until December 2003. However, the agency is also considering possibilities like signal improvements and taking some of **Amtrak's Penn Station schedule slots** to try to cram more trains into the capacity-challenged station and Hudson River tunnels.

It is unclear how much relief NJTransit will see once the downtown PATH line is running again. Some downtown **jobs have shifted to Midtown**, and commuting patterns may take time to shift as rebuilding progresses. NJ Transit is also planning to study overall commuting patterns, according to the *Record*.

Instead of significantly delaying the \$450 million station's opening, NJTransit should develop creative solutions to burgeoning ridership. Because Secaucus is only one stop from Penn Station, the agency could for the time being simply run **shuttle trains** with most seats removed between the two hubs, as an alternative to packing riders from the Main and Pascack Valley lines onto already crowded Northeast Corridor, Coast and Midtown Direct trains. Opening the station sooner would also allow Transit to serve a larger intra-New Jersey market.

Peters said FHWA data shows that while highway mileage increased only 2% over the last two decades, highway travel increased 80% and the number of drivers increased by 30%. She outlined how 84% of the nation's \$7 trillion in freight traffic travels on highways. However, rather than implementing strategies to reverse these trends, the Bush administration DOT seems intent on accommodating them — while bypassing the environmental review process.

"Our environmental streamlining efforts can also help improve system preservation management and expedite the addition of new capacity," Peters said.

Other witnesses, including representatives from the Utah Dept. of Transportation, highway advocacy groups and trucking organizations focused on highway building and "streamlining" as well.

This group seemed to spell out the general parameters of the agenda that **transportation reactionaries** will push in next year's reauthorization of federal transportation legislation. A big question is how strongly that agenda will be represented in the bill the Bush administration may propose as early as this fall.

In a very different vein, Michael Replogle of **Environmental Defense** outlined in his testimony several ways that federal and state governments can reduce congestion **without widening or building roads**.

He urged Congress to promote and extend "Commuter Choice" programs, which provide financial incentives for commuters to use transit, carpool, walk, or bike to work; encourage the use of **higher tolls at peak traffic times** or for solo drivers in designated lanes; fund research for use-based car insurance, where drivers save by driving less; and promote transit, bicycling and walking.

"Throwing more money into road building and streamlining project reviews to curtail consideration of environmental factors in transportation decisions won't solve congestion," Replogle said. "But better accountability, planning, consideration of alternatives, and support for new smart incentive strategies can help local and state agencies, business, and citizens cut their way through our traffic mess."

...But Many States Looking to Fund Repair

Despite talk in Washington about a new generation of highway construction, states around the country are desperate for money to **repair existing roads** and bridges. Two years ago, New Jersey passed one of the country's most innovative transportation laws,

The Tri-State Transportation Campaign web site:

www.tstc.org

requiring the Dept. of Transportation to reduce its backlog of structurally deficient roads and bridges by half in five years. Now, other states are pursuing similar repair-oriented laws or selling voters on bonds or spending referendums with promises of road repair. While New Jersey DOT has stubbornly refused to live up to the spirit or letter of its state transportation law, commonly known as "fix-it-first," other states could do a better job of following through.

North Carolina residents and transportation officials are pushing the state to spend more money on highway maintenance, according to a local newspaper. During a statewide **transportation summit** in late April, more than 100 participants, half of whom were from the state DOT and Board of Transportation, said North Carolina cannot continue to build new roads while existing infrastructure is crumbling.

In **Louisiana**, Governor Mike Foster recently said he wants to call a **special session of the legislature** to create a referendum that would provide more funds to fix the state's roads and bridges. "I'm tired of people who are unhappy with the roads," Foster said in a radio show in mid-May. "I want to give them a chance to vote on raising money to improve highways or keep roads in their current condition." The Governor has proposed raising trucking or license plate fees. An aide to the Governor told a reporter that a special session could take place as early as the fall.

Fixing **Oregon's** road and bridges is a major campaign issue in the state's **gubernatorial race** and the six major party candidates agree that repairs cannot be put off. Last year, the state legislature passed a bond providing \$400 million to repair bridges and build new roads. At a Portland City Club forum, each candidate proposed raising more revenue from user fees or through bonded debt. One candidate said any new revenue should be tied to specific improvements, which could ensure that the funds go to repair.

The Michigan Land Use Institute is spearheading an effort there to develop a "fix-it-first" mandate. However, experience in New Jersey shows that passing a law may be an insufficient step in changing transportation spending. Elected officials also need to buy into the agenda to ensure that bureaucratic establishments are not able to derail reform efforts.

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



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MTR#367 Contributing: Janine Bauer, Fred Kaimann 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

Calendar

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

May 31, 7-9am Bike to Work events in nine CT towns, with breakfast, gifts and prizes. 860-522-2217 or sfry@crcog.org

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 6, 2-8:30pm New York Bicycling Club's "Better Roads for New York State" H. Lee Denison Building, 100 Veterans Memorial Highway, Hauppauge. Speakers from AAA, FHWA, DOT and local bicycling clubs. 518-505-9499 or jesse@nybc.net

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

June 13, 6:30-9:30 Canal Street Community Transportation Workshop with NYMTC. P.S. 234, 292 Greenwich Street, Manhattan. 212-221-1131 ext. 6132 or mduoyle@ekmail.com

June 18, 6:30-9:30 Canal Street Community Transportation Workshop with NYMTC. The Puffin Room, 435 Broome Street, Manhattan. 212-221-1131 ext. 6132 or mduoyle@ekmail.com

June 19, 2-8:30pm New York Bicycling Club's "Better Roads for New York State" Grand Army Plaza, Brooklyn. Speakers from AAA, FHWA, DOT and local bicycling clubs. 518-505-9499 or jesse@nybc.net

more calendar entries at www.tstc.org