

# Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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## NEWS

### Queens Buses, Riders Sitting in Limbo

Bus drivers and other workers at the Queens Surface, Jamaica Buses and Triboro Coach companies walked off the job last week, leaving over 115,000 Queens bus riders scrambling for options — the strike continued into its fifth day Friday. The dispute is over health care benefits — transit workers say they should receive the same increase offered to city workers.

But early in the week, Mayor Bloomberg said the issue was between the workers and the private companies. “The **city will not get involved**...It’s sad, but you want to let the process play out,” he told reporters. However, the companies receive the portion of their operating budgets not covered by fares from the city, and the city was at the table when a preliminary labor agreement was inked earlier this year. The city also sets fares, buys the buses and does most of the planning for the companies’ service.

In response, Transport Workers Union members circulated “Bloomberg to Queens: Drop Dead!” flyers. *Newsday* echoed their sentiments in a Tuesday editorial, saying it was disingenuous of the mayor to wash his hands in settling the dispute given the **city’s strong role in funding and running the buses**.

Later in the week, the city’s labor relations officials spoke with transit workers, and Queens City Council members called on the mayor to get more involved.

The week’s events are one more example of why the city and state should **do away with the hybrid bus system** and have **NYC Transit take over** all publicly funded transit in the city. Mayor Bloomberg mentioned transferring the bus routes to Transit in comments on the city budget in May (*MTR* #365). Whether leaving franchise bus riders and workers out to dry is part of a gambit to **force the issue** is not yet clear. Shifting the routes to NYC Transit without any financial support from the city could result in serious service cuts in neighborhoods that are poorly served by subways.

Environmentalists have also received information that the city has considered ending the “no diesels” purchase policy that has increased the number of compressed natural gas buses in the franchise fleet (*MTR* #369). So far, information about the city budget makes no mention of such a change.

### Northern Branch gets the Nod

— Will Link to Hudson-Bergen Line —

Although it was rumored for a month, U.S. **Senator Robert Torricelli**, in a meeting with environmental and transit advocates in Washington DC last week, openly announced that the Hudson Bergen Light Rail northward extension would follow the Northern Branch (a former freight line), and that he would pursue federal funding for it in next year’s major federal transportation authorization.

A bi-partisan group of state lawmakers, the County Executive and planners had studied **three Bergen County alignment** choices, including the restoration of commuter rail on CSX’ West Shore Line. The West Shore study was originally separate from consideration of the Hudson-Bergen line. Early concepts saw the Northern Branch ending at a ferry terminal, or the West Shore line feeding commuter trains into the Secaucus Transfer. A plan advanced by Bergen County planners would have connected light rail along the east-west NY Susquehanna and Western line to the northern end of the Hudson-Bergen line.

Torricelli said the Hudson-Bergen light rail line would **extend through Englewood to Tenafly**, up the Northern Branch to a point south of the NJ-NY border, rather than end at the Vince Lombardi park-n-ride lot at the NJ Turnpike’s 18E exit, as the original Hudson-Bergen project called for.

**CSX opposes passenger service** on the **West Shore Line** without the purchase of additional right of way, since the line is its main egress out of New Jersey on the line to Chicago.

The West Shore line’s initial planning documents show that it offers larger ridership than other lines studied, and would be the only line that would adequately serve growing Rockland County, where commuters need a better way to get to Manhattan than across the Tappan Zee bridge with connection to southerly highways or the Metro-North Railroad. It’s unclear what the ridership on a northern extension of the Hudson-Bergen line would be.

West Shore passenger service advocates, including the Tri-State Transportation Campaign, are concerned that if the Northern Branch/Hudson-Bergen extension becomes the focus of political and federal

funding commitment for the next 5-10 years, the West Shore line, just a few miles westward of it, will be effectively foreclosed for generations. It is likely that the rest of New Jersey, which is also clamoring for more rail transit, will not look favorably on another generation's worth of funding for the West Shore if the Northern Branch goes first.

The planning and environmental review process resulted in three separate draft environmental impact statements in July 2001, with hearings in different locales, after a long planning and negotiation period.



Somewhat incongruously, New York officials recently decided to study commuter rail service even **further north** along the West Shore Line. The *Journal-News* reported that while West Nyack had been studied as a West Shore passenger terminus, Rockland County has persuaded other members of the NY Metropolitan Transportation Council to commit funds for study of service up to **West Haverstraw**. The issue will be moot if NJ Transit abandons West Shore commuter rail for the foreseeable future.

#### Hudson Towns Worry That T-Z Fix is In

Municipal leaders and concerned Hudson Valley citizens are attempting to pool resources to aggressively question and independently verify findings of the Tappan Zee Bridge replacement study being conducted by the NY State Thruway and Metro-North Railroad. Many lower Hudson municipal governments have banded together in a coalition called **GUARD: Governments United in Action for Responsible Development**. They are concerned that the agencies have already identified a "preferred alternative" — a new, bigger bridge with a commuter rail line on it — and are conducting a self-fulfilling study.

Members of the study's advisory committee expressed similar concerns at a meeting last week, recalling that the state task force that led to the study was run by the MTA and other agencies and ignored input from non-governmental participants.

Metro-North and the Thruway say they will have a short list of about five alternatives in hand in about a year. The agencies say they will be able to make major decisions about the Tappan Zee corridor by 2005. "I think the plans are already in cement. They just haven't told anybody yet," Frank Ronnenberg of the Westchester County Association, Westchester's leading business group, told the *Journal-News*.

The Tri-State Transportation Campaign web site:

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

#### NY Safety Bills Nearly Law

A "yield to pedestrian" bill that extends the rights of pedestrians in crosswalks passed both the New York State Senate and Assembly last week, and awaits Governor George Pataki's signature. The current law governing intersections without traffic lights gives pedestrians the right-of-way only in the half of the street where they are walking — a poorly conceived arrangement that makes "near misses" in crosswalks legal. The new law, which is supported by the NY State DOT, would give the pedestrian the right-of-way in the entire crosswalk.

The bill's language says "It will improve pedestrian safety by making it safer for pedestrians to cross streets and providing the public with a greater understanding of the rights of pedestrians in a crosswalk. About half of the fifty states now have laws similar to this proposal."

Similar bills have been approved in the Legislature before, but were not signed into law. **Assemblywoman Deborah Glick** of Manhattan is the bill's primary author and champion.

Both Senate and Assembly have also passed a bill that establishes a "**graduated driver licensing**" system for young drivers. Under the system, drivers under the age of 18 move from a learner's permit to an intermediate license after passing a driving exam.

With an intermediate license, drivers are restricted in the number of passengers under 21 allowed in the car, and, after 9 p.m., must drive under the supervision of an adult in downstate counties.

Graduated licensing programs have already been enacted in Florida, Wisconsin, California, Maryland and Oregon. Studies have shown a 5-16% reduction in teen crashes once the system is in place.



A bill to increase any physical **attack on a bus, subway or train operator** to a felony assault charge has passed the Senate, and supporters late this week felt good about its chances in the State Assembly. Recent attacks on bus drivers that received prominent news coverage increased the legislation's momentum. Some transit labor leaders feel the increased penalty will not protect transit workers much unless signs noting the severity of the crime are posted near the fronts of buses and crew stations on trains.

#### E-ZPass Fix Should Embrace Congestion-Busting Policies

The New Jersey State Assembly Transportation Committee will wrap up its review of the state's E-ZPass debacle in the next few weeks. Transportation commissioner James Fox's recommendations for the system's future are also expected soon. While it

is clear that the toll system's financing needs to be re-worked, the review process is also an opportunity for the state to pursue two strategies for reducing traffic: implementing high-speed E-ZPass and greater differentials between rush hour and non-peak tolls.

In testimony submitted to the Assembly Transportation Committee, the Tri-State Transportation Campaign urged the committee to recommend an early transition to high-speed E-ZPass in its report.

"Parkway users will best be served by the removal of many of the mainline tollbooths and their replacement by high-speed overhead toll collection technology," Campaign director Janine Bauer testified. "Quite apart from the E-ZPass contract and fiscal mess, **drivers like E-ZPass** and have been greatly benefited by it. Non-stop tolling is the future for E-ZPass and will burnish the state's image as a technologically advanced place."

The Campaign also urged the Transportation Committee to consider recommendations for expanding **congestion pricing strategies** at tolled facilities, which charge a higher rate during peak travel times.

#### **Bush to Bankrupt Amtrak ?**

The measures in U.S. Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta's announcement of the Bush Administration "plan" for Amtrak Thursday seemed like a reshuffling of deck chairs on a sinking ship. If at all workable, they would clearly take an extended period to implement. **But if Amtrak is bled dry in the interim**, there will be relatively little left to privatize or push off to states. Mineta avoided the issue of Amtrak's immediate need for cash to sustain operations — he was silent on Amtrak's request for a \$200 million loan for the summer and pledged only about half of what Amtrak says it needs in fiscal 2003 to make needed repairs and stave off service cuts.

The longer-term plan outlined yesterday by Mineta at a U.S. Chamber of Commerce event called for an **end to federal operating support** for intercity passenger trains. That would push inevitable operating deficits onto state governments in areas like the northeast corridor where states are already underinvesting in mass transit and transportation more generally. The Bush Administration also wants to hand the Northeast Corridor rail line itself, the only major track and right-of-way owned by Amtrak, to a multi-state consortium, **further increasing rail costs for state governments** along a route where rail makes sense and is capturing market share from air shuttle services.

Mineta also called for contracting out rail service contracts to competitive bidders, who he said would be evaluated and selected by the Federal Railroad Administration.

"Both the Turnpike toll plan in 2000 and the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey toll plan for Hudson River crossings in 2001 incorporated this progressive feature," Ms. Bauer testified. "The results have been good. At the Turnpike, all growth has been in the off-peak, and with the higher rates coming in January, we expect to see more progress. At the Port Authority crossings, initial results showed a 7% decline in trips during the peak after congestion pricing was instituted, with corresponding increases in carpooling, transit and off-peak travel."

The **Port Authority** is developing its high-speed toll collection capacity (*MTR #370*). The **Turnpike Authority** has deployed high-speed EZ-Pass on Exit 6 and will do so on the new Exit 1. The Garden State Parkway has also determined that high-speed E-Z Pass is a workable program for its toll collection.

E-Z Pass' financial troubles could cause state leaders to eliminate discounts for E-Z Pass users. But because E-Z Pass and the technology applications that evolve from it are clearly toll collection's future, any measures that reduce incentives for drivers to use the system are big steps in the wrong direction.

#### **Metro-North Penn Station Plans Shape Up**

Metro-North Railroad, which is studying scenarios for providing service to Penn Station NY, has narrowed its choices to service over the Hudson and New Haven lines, **eliminating the Harlem Line** from consideration. Metro-North previously reduced twenty possible alignments to three weekday services: on the Hudson Line via Amtrak's west side Empire Connection, the Harlem Line via the Hudson Line and the New Haven Line via Amtrak's Hell Gate Line.

Metro-North has determined that Hudson and New Haven line connections would serve the highest potential ridership and provide the best time savings for riders, during both weekday and off-peak/weekend time periods. In addition to yielding lower ridership, Metro-North says a **Harlem line option would require track construction** to connect the Harlem and Hudson lines. Both the Hudson and New Haven line alternatives would use existing tracks, reducing costs.

As part of its Penn Station plan, Metro-North would build **new stations**, at **West 125<sup>th</sup>** and **West 59<sup>th</sup>** Streets for the Hudson Line and at Co-Op City, Parkchester and Hunts Point for the New Haven Line.

Metro-North west side access would complement MTA's plan to link Long Island Railroad to Grand Central. It would in fact require completion of the latter project, at least on weekdays, because of Penn Station's capacity crunch. It's unclear how much Penn Station capacity would be freed up by the diversion of some LIRR to Grand Central, given expected LIRR and NJ Transit ridership growth.

## Improving Marks for Metro-North

Riders on Metro-North Railroad lines gave service a record-tying rating of 8.0, on a scale of one to ten, for the first quarter of 2002. A customer survey, which obtained a response rate of 75%, also showed high satisfaction with many individual service factors.

The most dramatic increase, according to a MNRR press release, was in the category of overall **communications**, which received a score of 7.8, compared with 7.6 in the last quarter of 2001. Metro North attributes the gain to efforts to improve platform and on-board announcements, and to make information available at train stations and on the internet.

Other categories with high marks were train scheduling (7.6), courtesy and responsiveness of employees (8.2), on-time performance (8.0), and the condition of Grand Central Terminal (8.8).

Overall, 96% of Hudson Line riders, 95% of Harlem Line customers and 91% of New Haven Line riders said overall service on the railroad was the same or better in the first quarter as in the past.

## Midland Beach Eyed For S.I. Fast Ferry

The Port Authority favors Midland Beach over New Dorp for a site to develop **new ferry service from Staten Island** to Manhattan, according to the S.I. *Advance*. Midland already has a parking lot for commuters driving to the site, and is more accessible to boats because deep waters start closer to shore.

Although some community members are against the plan, others hope to take advantage of transit service that does not rely on crowded roadways. The Port Authority estimates that South Shore express bus service to Manhattan takes 1 hour and 50 minutes, compared to 25 minutes by ferry.

"It would be a benefit to the Island as a whole to have a fast boat location," a member of Community Board 2's Transportation Committee told the *Advance*. "I realize you'll be burdening the immediate locality. We have to somehow measure a balance."

The Port Authority says it intends to study the traffic impacts a ferry station would have on the surrounding Midland Beach community.

Fast ferry service may also be in the works for other Staten Island locations. South Shore City Council member Andrew Lanza told the *Advance* he is working with the Port Authority and Governor Pataki's office to create an additional fast ferry stop in his district.

"If we can get people out of buses and cars, we ease traffic not only for the South Shore, but for the entire community," he said.

## Calendar

**June 25, 1:30pm** NYMTC Pedestrian-Bicycle Working Group. NYC Dept. of Transportation Offices, 40 Worth St., Manhattan. 718-472-3046

**June 25, 6-8pm** Auto-Free NY meeting, "Rethinking Amtrak - Can Better Intercity Rail Reduce Car Use?" Anthony Perl, Visiting Professor, CUNY Institute for Urban Systems. 212-475-3394 or geohaikalis@juno.com

**June 26th, 7-9pm** "Smart Growth or Sprawl?" Myron Orfield, Minnesota State Senator and John Powell, Institute on Race and Poverty. Moriah Baptist Church, 222 Barbour St., Hartford 860-232-8840 or hr@UnitedAction.org

**June 27th, 6:30 - 8:30pm** "Smart Growth or Sprawl?" (see above) Holy Trinity Orthodox Church, 247 Washington St, Norwich 860-232-8840 or hr@UnitedAction.org

**June 27, noon** NYC Transit Riders Council meeting. 347 Madison Avenue, 5th floor. 212-878-7087 or mail@pcac.org

**July 8, 1pm** North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority meeting. One Newark Center, 17th floor. 973-639-8406 or della@njtpa.org.

**July 10, 7pm** Rethink LITP2000 Citizen's Public Hearing. Longwood Library, 800 Middle Country Road, Middle Island. 516-541-1006 x16 or lipc@lipc.org

**July 25, 7pm** Rethink LITP2000 Citizen's Public Hearing. Sacred Heart Church, 730 Merrick Avenue, North Merrick. 516-541-1006 x16 or lipc@lipc.org

**July 20, 9am-4pm** "Listening to the City," public meeting about the rebuilding of downtown NYC. 1-800-862-3154 or [www.listeningtothecity.org](http://www.listeningtothecity.org)

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

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



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