

Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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NEWS

Bush Winging Transportation Policy

The politics of keeping Amtrak rolling last week appeared to herald a running battle that could spill into next year's federal transportation reauthorization. U.S. Transportation Secretary Mineta's vague policy speech (MTR #371) and attempt to deny Amtrak a needed \$100 million loan guarantee had the hallmarks of an **ideological assault**, especially coming in the same week that major airlines were also back in the news seeking **billions in federal guarantees**.

But the Bush administration may not have anticipated as vociferous a reaction as it received from both coasts soon after Mineta's speech, or to have understood the role of Amtrak in many metropolitan **commuter rail** systems. "The Bush administration has a very thin skin," Rep. Peter DeFazio of Oregon told reporters. "What they proposed last week was a thinly veiled attempt to kill Amtrak. They backed off. Obviously, they feel there's a constituency."

Amtrak President David Gunn said Mineta had not spoken with him before making the speech. It looks as though there was **no consultation** between the administration and the **governors** of states where Amtrak is an important part of the transportation system. Senators Biden and Clinton told reporters that saddling the states with Amtrak costs was, respectively, "cockamamie" and "a non-starter."

Still, the threat of cutting Amtrak off gave the administration some momentum. The deal worked out over the weekend includes an Amtrak pledge to find **\$100 million in budget savings** and to refrain from planning new services through the fall of 2003. In return, the railroad gets a \$100 million loan guarantee and administration backing for an additional congressional appropriation later in the year, and avoids for now any deal over long-term restructuring. However, the administration will try to keep Amtrak on a short leash and exact more concessions in time.

But the **burden will be on Mineta** to show that the administration has a sincere belief that inter-city passenger rail service has a role in easing highway and airport gridlock, and that the reforms he proposes will lead to better, more attractive rail service.

"Every form of transportation in this country receives federal support," Senator Schumer told press.

Pataki Pushes for Clean Air Act Exemption

The Pataki Administration seems intent on pursuing Congressional action to waive New York State's responsibility to have a transportation plan that conforms with the state's "emission budget" under the Clean Air Act.

The state says it is seeking the waiver because the offices of agency that develops the conformity determination, the NY Metropolitan Transportation Council (NYMTC), were destroyed last September 11, and that rebuilding lower Manhattan should not be encumbered by troublesome environmental rules.

However, a Clean Air Act "conformity" waiver, which the state wants until 2005, would not only affect downtown, but the **entire NYMTC region**, from Putnam County to Long Island's east end. It's pretty hard to justify the addition of Long Island highway projects to the region's transportation plan without any air pollution analysis or offsetting measures because we need to pick up the pieces of September 11. Moreover, most of the data and work needed to produce the conformity analysis was not at NYMTC, but in the offices of consultants not located in the World Trade Center.

There is evidence that, prior to September 11, New York was going to have a hard time with transportation/clean air conformity because of rising vehicle miles traveled and **worsening per-vehicle emissions** caused by the proliferation of sport utility vehicles. Postponing the day of reckoning will not make the task any easier, especially if Governor Pataki's State DOT tries to go ahead with its plan to **widen most major Long Island highways**.

A better approach than asking Congress to start granting Clean Air Act exemptions, which could lead to a **feeding frenzy** where other regions with pollution problems and Congressional factions aligned with the Bush anti-environmental agenda try to start stripping away layers of the law's protections, is for the state to enter the administrative status known as a "conformity lapse." In metro areas like Atlanta, a lapse has led to a negotiation over what types of transportation projects will proceed. Such a process would keep reconstruction underway downtown, keep the transit capital program moving and allow road and bridge reconstruction to proceed. A lapse would prevent the state from adding

big new highway projects to its capital program.

Given the sensitivity of lower Manhattan residents to air pollution issues these days, we're surprised that the governor's office is pursuing this course. Governor Pataki will not look good in a **big, public fight** with environmentalists on the issue. A conformity lapse, on the other hand, is an arcane regulatory matter unlikely to garner much attention.

NY's Senators should stay away from legislative attempts to open up the Clean Air Act, and Representatives who rushed to support the exemption without full consideration should take their names off the bill.

Is Suffolk Reducing County Bus Funding ?

Suffolk County bus riders, who have been paying an extra 25 cents since February, will see **fares rolled back** July 1 because additional state transit aid came through in Albany's budget. However, Suffolk County may want to use the money from the fare hike to offset its own contribution to transit funding – rather than using it to stave off future hikes.

Suffolk County's director of transportation operations, Robert Shinnick, told the *NY Times* that the extra \$300,000-350,000 raised from the fare hike "would be used to **offset the \$7 million subsidy** the county provides to Suffolk County Transit."

When Suffolk County raised its bus fares in February, it said the hike was necessary due to a transit deficit and a previous reduction in state aid. The County went through with the hike despite vigorous opposition from transit advocates – who pointed to significant increases for Suffolk Transit in Governor George Pataki's executive budget – and State Senator Cesar Trunzo, who offered to find emergency state aid to plug the budget gap (*MTR #348*). However, County Executive Robert Gaffney pledged to rescind the hike if the extra state funding became available.

Although the County Executive kept his word about rolling back fares, Shinnick's statement sends a poor message to riders, who endured five months of higher fares, and to the state, which increased its funding levels, about Suffolk's commitment to transit.

The recently passed state budget includes \$11.3 million in state aid for 2002, including \$1 million to make up for last year's cuts and another \$800,000 as an advance on the 2003 program. Gaffney has said that as long as state funding levels are not cut, a **fare hike will not be necessary through 2003**.

Suffolk County should use the money raised from this fare hike to create a rainy-day fund or to implement service improvements. Reducing its contribution to Suffolk Transit would not only be unfair to riders, but would give the County little credibility with the state when seeking future funding increases.

MTA Takeover of Queens Buses: Potential Pitfalls

Eight days after workers of the Queens Surface, Jamaica Bus and Triboro Coach companies walked off the job, NYC Mayor Michael Bloomberg said the city would pursue an MTA takeover of the routes of the **city's seven franchise bus companies**. Turning control over to the MTA rather than the city would require legislative action and funding from Albany. The mayor said shifting the buses' management would relieve the city of \$167 million a year in costs.

In response, the Straphangers Campaign, Transportation Alternatives and the Campaign wrote to the mayor, Governor Pataki and MTA Chair Peter Kalikow to urge that, in the event of an MTA takeover of private buses, direct **city subsidies** to the lines **be maintained at current levels**. The groups also called on the city to increase capital funding to MTA to address the franchise buses' infrastructure needs.

"MTA New York City Transit already faces a large deficit in 2003," the groups wrote. "The city franchised private bus system is the seventh largest in America, moving 111 million passengers on nearly 1,300 buses in 2000. Asking **NYC Transit** to take over the private buses – effectively **increasing its bus operation by 25%** – without maintaining city subsidies will create even further pressure to raise fares and cut service."

The groups warned that elimination of city funding could cause a fare increase for all riders, pointing to the experience with cutting city subsidies for student transit passes. That action turned the \$45 million annual cost of the program over to riders, contributing to the 25-cent fare increase in November, 1995.

Since the mayor's request is unlikely to be addressed by the state Legislature until next session, it may have little effect on the current impasse. A failure to resolve the dispute over worker health care benefits – which private bus workers feel should match increases given to city workers – leaves over 115,000 Queens bus riders without a ride each day.

McGreevey Won't Commit to Route 92 Position

In response to a letter from a group of central New Jersey mayors, Governor James McGreevey has said he will not take a position on construction of Route 92 until the draft environmental impact statement is completed. According to the *South Brunswick Post*, the mayors had **asked the Governor to publicly oppose and halt** the proposed 6.7-mile toll highway that would link Route 1 to Turnpike Exit 8A, and slice through the largest remaining parcel of open space in that part of Middlesex County.

The draft environmental impact statement for Route 92 – which was mandated by the U.S. EPA after pres-

sure from citizen groups, municipal leaders and the Tri-State Transportation Campaign – is due out in September, according to the Army Corps of Engineers. The Central New Jersey officials hope that new leadership at the Turnpike Authority and pressure from **Governor McGreevey**, who has voiced strong **anti-sprawl sentiments**, will lead the state to abandon the project.

The NJ Turnpike Authority has encountered opposition to Route 92 since it announced plans to construct the new highway through Middlesex County, on a section of land designated under the State Plan as part of New Jersey's "Environmentally Sensitive Planning Area." The affected area is the second largest of Middlesex County's land designated as environmentally sensitive (*MTR #170*).

Route 92 is an example of the kind of expensive, sprawl-inducing highway project that continue to **drain transportation coffers** while worsening congestion problems. The \$350 million slated for Route 92 is a major financial burden that affects not only the Turnpike Authority, but drivers – who may be required to pay higher tolls – and other transportation projects, which receive funding from the Turnpike's contribution to the Transportation Trust Fund.

In addition to destroying open space and farmland, Route 92 would have a domino effect in central New Jersey, inviting more congestion, trucks and sprawl to the area. Middlesex officials are particularly concerned about the **influx of traffic** that Route 92 would bring to local roads.

"Route 92 will clog Route 1 to the south of Ridge Road and flood two lane roads to the west with car and truck traffic, worsening traffic flow," Rocky Hill Mayor Brian Nolan told press in April, when a group of Central New Jersey officials organized to oppose Route 92 (*MTR #359*).

The mayors of Hopewell, Franklin, Montgomery, Manville Townships and Assemblyman Upendra Chivukula also voiced opposition to Route 92.

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



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The Tri-State Transportation Campaign web site:

www.tstc.org

Calendar

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

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

July 11, noon Long Island Railroad Commuter Council meeting. 10th fl, 347 Madison Avenue, Manhattan. 212-878-7087 or www.pcac.org

July 17, 3pm CT Southwest Regional Planning Agency - coastal Transportation Investment Area regular meeting. 10 Middle Street (Governor's office), Bridgeport. 203-316-5190.

July 18, 12:30pm Metro-North Railroad Commuter Council meeting. 10th Floor Conference Room, 347 Madison Avenue, Manhattan. 212-878-7087 or www.pcac.org

July 20, 9am-4pm "Listening to the City," 5,000 residents of New York City and the surrounding region to participate in a day-long event devoted to shaping plans for the redevelopment of Lower Manhattan and the creation of a permanent memorial for 9/11. Jacob Javits Center, Manhattan. www.listeningtothecity.org or 800-862-3154.

July 15, noon New York City Transit Riders Council meeting. 5th Floor Board Room, 347 Madison Avenue, Manhattan. 212-878-7087 or www.pcac.org

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

July 28, 7-10am Join Transportation Alternatives to help document levels of bicycle transportation in NYC. bridgecounts@transalt.org or 212-629-8080.

July 31, 9:00 am MTA board meeting. 347 Madison Avenue, 5th floor. Manhattan. 212-878-7440.

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