

Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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NEWS

MTA Should Prepare Now for Variable Tolls

Although the MTA and Governor Pataki's office have issued predictable statements that no subway and bus fare hike is under consideration, those following MTA finances believe the agency **will propose an increase late this year** or early in the next, after the fall election. Mayor Bloomberg's comments last week underscored the prediction.

The MTA generally increases bridge and tunnel tolls along with bus, subway and commuter rail fares. Although it is not allowed to admit that a hike is under consideration, the MTA should put its bridge and tunnel managers to work now to develop a plan for variable tolls – higher at rush hour, lower during other times.

A toll increase is the time to implement such a system. "Smart" tolls give back to motorists in ways that an across-the-board toll increase cannot – off-peak drivers pay less, while the rush hour sees some measure of congestion relief.

MTA leaders have argued in the past that variable tolls will not work at its crossings because of competition from the free East River crossings. Their reasoning is wrong. Of course, free crossings will always compete with those that charge tolls. But why would a rush hour toll of \$4.50 that is part of a variable pricing schedule lead to more diversions to free bridges than a \$4.50 toll that is in effect at all times of day? If anything, **off-peak toll discounts** — especially if they represent a marginal or no increase over today's rate — will result in **fewer diversions** during off-peak times.

Because the Port Authority and New Jersey Turnpike have **successfully implemented variable toll pricing** systems, the MTA and Governor Pataki — who approved the will run the risk of appearing behind the times if they come through with a flat, "dumb" toll hike that offers nothing to drivers but more out of pocket costs.

New Jersey Makes Strong Commitment to High-Speed Tolls

Governor McGreevey and NJ Transportation Commissioner James Fox revealed a plan for the state's troubled E-ZPass system Thursday. The plan commendably focused not only on fixing the system's financial debacle, but taking advantage of E-ZPass' potential as a congestion buster. It calls for high-speed E-ZPass installations at several new sites on the Garden State Parkway.

The plan directs the NJ Highway Authority to **immediately study the Parkway's most plausible locations** for high-speed toll collection, with recommendations due October 1.

The plan also calls on the **Turnpike Authority** to develop a high-speed E-Z Pass plan. It suggests that **high-speed lanes** could be added at some barrier-style plazas suitable for a retrofit such as on Interchanges 18E and 18W near the Meadowlands. Currently, the Turnpike's Interchange 6 has two high-speed E-ZPass lanes and Interchange 1 will have four high-speed lanes when completed.

In addition to high-speed E-ZPass, the plan echoed other improvements that the Campaign has suggested for years (*MTR #206*), such as better E-ZPass lane design and signage and an end to installation of mixed mode lanes, where drivers can pay cash or use E-ZPass.

Other recommendations include consolidation of the three toll road agencies and future integration of back office operations with NY E-ZPass operators, and a \$1 per month fee for E-ZPass account holders. The plan unfortunately recommends an **end to off-peak E-ZPass discounts** on the Parkway. Officials said the move would raise \$13 million per year for the financially troubled toll system.

Warrington's Candid on Bad Budget Practices

The straight talk from director George Warrington about NJTransit bleeding its capital budget to meet day-to-day expenses is a welcome warning call about the drift of transportation policy in New Jersey. Smart planning during the early 1990s brought successes like the Morris and Essex Line's

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Midtown Direct service, and continues to deliver good projects like the Montclair Connection and new phases of the Hudson-Bergen light rail line. However, Trenton's inability to grapple with the **implications of an expanding transit system** and its attraction of new riders may put these smart investments at risk.

In presenting the agency's annual budget to the NJ Transit board, Warrington said that, despite last winter's fare increase, Transit was **using more capital money than ever to sustain its operating budget**. "In the long term, this capital program and this operating budget won't work," he said. News reports said Transit is using \$260 million in capital funds to sustain its operating budget.

This year's state budget held its contribution to NJ Transit operations at last year's levels. Given the big deficit that was facing the state, that may be a victory in itself. However, any sense that the problem stems from a short-term fiscal crunch is misplaced. Trenton's underfunding of transit operations has been a **problem through much of the 1990s**, and was starkly underlined by both a Rutgers University report and a NJ Transit strategic planning document last fall (*MTR #343*). NJ Transit ridership increased 38% from 1992 to 2000.

Warrington's candor about Transit's current budget-making practices should have implications for several actors. Governor McGreevey and the legislature should expect an earful from riders and transit advocates for an extended period leading into next year's budget process, especially in light of last year's fare increase but **inaction** on other transportation revenues like the **state gas tax** and **Garden State Parkway tolls**. Riders should insist that NJ Transit call off any talk of further fare increases until it is clear that Trenton is prepared to do its share.

It's worth noting that the collapse of the New York subway system in the 1970s was preceded by significant bleeding of capital budgets for operations, and that the capital programs that were established to bring it back relied on contributions from many sectors: riders, city and state government, the business sector and transit unions. One report suggests that NJ Transit stations are showing signs of **deferred maintenance**. Bad station conditions will eventually discourage riders.

The adopted NJ Transit budget has some good news for riders. The board expanded the times that off-peak round trip fares would be in effect, partially rolling back restrictions imposed last winter along with the fare increase. Transit also said its operating plan and new rolling stock would allow for the addition of about 10,000 new train seats and 4,500 new bus seats to daily service later this year.

Montclair Connection Will Add to Ridership, Capacity Pressure

NJ Transit is conducting test runs that will lead to the September start of Midtown Direct service on the Boonton line via the now-complete Montclair Connection. The new service will bring a further ridership growth to NJ Transit, underscoring the agency's need for a solid long term financial plan. It will also create demand that will add to the capacity burdens at Penn Station and the Northeast Corridor's Hudson tunnel, spotlighting the importance for the region to get moving on a second NY/NJ train tunnel and additional Midtown station capacity.

Officials and Experts to Discuss Car-Free Prospect Park

On Wednesday, July 17, Transportation Alternatives is convening a large public meeting on the future of the **loop roadway** in Brooklyn's Prospect Park. Many local elected officials from communities around the park, Borough President Marty Markowitz and former city transportation commissioners Lou Riccio and Sam Schwartz will attend.

The NYC Dept. of Transportation has a traffic engineering view of the park, and continues to **oppose any reduction in traffic** using the park roadway as a high-speed shortcut.

The event will begin at 6:30 p.m. It will be held at the Union Temple, 17 Eastern Parkway, near Grand Army Plaza. For information, contact T.A. at 212-629-8080, www.transalt.org

More Concern over Long Island Road Plan

Advocates of smart growth and sensible transportation gathered in Longwood, Long Island last week to voice opinions on the NY State DOT long range highway expansion plan, LITP 2000. The Long Island Progressive Coalition organized the "**citizen's hearing**" as an antidote to DOT's infomercial-style meetings, which are designed to prevent public statements (*MTR #361*).

An agency representative spoke briefly about the LITP 2000 plan, which will cost \$5 billion dollars and calls for 65 new miles of HOV lanes, a suburb-suburb express bus system, 105 miles of arterial highway widening and 20 miles of roadway extensions. The plan **does not take into account land use/transportation dynamics**, may drain resources from existing public transit systems and its highway capacity emphasis is likely to add to Long Island's congestion nightmare over the long run.

Citizens, civic leaders and local officials at the hearing agreed that strong measures are needed to fight mounting traffic congestion and sprawl on Long Island. Many urged that investment on the island

emphasize improvements to existing transit service, open space preservation and downtown revitalization. They criticized LITP 2000's focus on paving.

The Tri-State Campaign's Michelle DiChiara said that the state DOT must stop responding to congestion with plans for bigger highways. Instead, the

Anti-Sprawl Effort, Road Plan Collide

The New Jersey Township of Byram is gaining allies in its efforts to stop the NJ Dept. of Transportation plan to **widen Route 206**. In late May, the Office of State Planning told the Township Council that the widening plan is incompatible with the state plan and contradicts "smart growth" principles. Representatives of the Office of State Planning told the New Jersey *Herald* they plan to speak with DOT about revising the project.

NJ DOT wants to widen Route 206 from two lanes to four for 1.2 miles **through the center of Byram**. The township, however, wants a scaled-down project that realigns one intersection where traffic backs up. Byram has received an \$80,000 smart growth grant from the Office of State Planning to revitalize its downtown. The expanded highway would **preclude any hope** of fostering a more pedestrian-friendly main street.

The township's revitalization efforts have also led to adoption of land-use principles that focus development in the town center. The town council, local planning board and the township's environmental commission officially oppose widening Route 206. However, efforts to dissuade NJ DOT from widening Route 206 have so far failed to stop the project.

Town officials wrote a series of letters to state agencies and elected officials in May, seeking to round up opposition to the road widening. In response, the NJ **Environmental Protection Commissioner Bradley Campbell** and the North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority have urged DOT to rethink the project.

Byram is located in one of New Jersey's least sprawl-afflicted areas in rural Sussex County, in the farthest northwest corner of the state. A large portion of Sussex County has been designated by the state for limited development and open space preservation. But projects like Rte 206 and Route 15 (*MTR #297*) threaten to literally pave the way for more sprawl.

NJ DOT also plans to widen Route 206 further south through Somerset County townships of Raritan, Hillsborough and Montgomery. A new five mile, four lane elevated bypass to Route 206 is also planned, running through Hillsborough and Montgomery (*MTR #285*).

state needs to send a stronger message to municipalities and towns about development patterns that generate traffic and congestion, and give them tools to help foster transit- and pedestrian-friendly development.

The Campaign called on Governor Pataki to suspend the LITP plan and instead commit to:

- Levels of state aid that will allow **Long Island Bus** and **Suffolk Transit** to increase service while keeping fares stable.
- Full funding for the Long Island Railroad **Main Line Third Track** project.
- Faster development of a major Long Island **rail freight yard**, with funding to improve track clearances and investment in cross-Harbor facilities that can give freight trains greater access to Long Island.
- Creation of a state **smart growth extension office** for Long Island to assist municipalities with planning and grant applications for land preservation, downtown development, zoning and master plan changes, transfer of development rights programs, community-oriented street designs, traffic calming and transit-oriented development.

Connie Kepert, president of the Longwood Alliance and an outspoken advocate of smart land use planning and community design, explained that a big problem is breaking the cycle of strip development and **single-use zoning**. "Land use and transportation planning combined with community involvement is key to fight congestion. Plans that include grid networks of streets that connect will also reduce congestion and slow traffic down."

She urged that street designs accommodate people as well as cars, with ample crosswalks, bike lanes, sidewalks and medians planted with trees. "This is what people should think of when they think of Long Island," she said, "Not concrete and highway walls."

Allen Strauss, Director of Brookhaven Town's division of traffic safety, said town government favors more sustainable concepts and wants to rein in haphazard development.

Another LITP citizens hearing will take place in Nassau County July 25 (see calendar for details).

Connecticut Slices Towns' Road Funding

The revised Connecticut budget signed July 1 cuts state aid to municipalities by \$24.3 million – including \$10 million from the state's Town Aid for Roads program. Both Governor John Rowland's proposed 2002-03 budget and the budget adopted by the General Assembly, which was vetoed by the Governor, contained \$35 million for the local road repair program – the same level as in the previous three budgets.

The cut brings Town Aid for Roads funding to its **lowest level since 1998**. The state also reduced funding levels for Town Aid for Roads for most of the 1990's, when the state devoted only \$20 million a year to the program. Despite slight increases in the last few years, inflation-adjusted funding levels are still lower now than in the 1960s or 70s.

The cut is a bad choice for Connecticut. A better approach would be reduction in scale or delay of several of ConnDOT's big highway expansion projects. Low local road funding **pressures property taxes** or promotes deterioration that can lead to a variety of safety and other impacts.

The town of Vernon, CT, for example, will receive \$73,000 less than was expected through the Town Aid for Roads program. In an effort to keep taxes down, the town will put **no money into road repair** for the year, Mayor Diane Wheelock told the *Hartford Courant*.

The Connecticut Conference of Municipalities says local roads are seeing higher levels of traffic growth than state highways and interstates. A 1998 study for the Conference by Apogee Research found a 50% jump in VMT on local roads in Connecticut from 1986-1995, compared with a statewide increase of 15%.

Increased traffic on local roads coupled with low state investment in repair and basic maintenance is taking a toll. According to data compiled by the Conference of Municipalities, the repair bill for Connecticut's local road and bridge system is already **over \$300 million**. Putting off repair now will lead to even higher repair costs in the future.

Although the budget also gives Governor Rowland the power to cut \$35 million more in spending, Town Aid for Roads is one of the municipal aid programs exempt from further cuts.

The budget was signed as preparations are being made to start the huge, billion-dollar widening of I-95. The first phase of the decade-long project will begin next week. Much of Connecticut's budget for roads is focused on just a few big highway projects. Others are I-84 expansion, extending CT Route 11, and widening CT Routes 2, 10, 20, 66 and 80.

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



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Calendar

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 17, 6:30pm Public hearing with local Brooklyn politicians and Transportation Alternatives to support a car-free Prospect Park. Union Temple near the Library at Grand Army Plaza. 212-629-2020 or info@transalt.org

July 18, noon Metro-North Railroad Commuter Council meeting. 10th Floor, 347 Madison Avenue, Manhattan. www.pcac.org, 212-878-7087

July 20, 9am-4pm "Listening to the City," 5,000 NYC residents and the surrounding region in a day-long event devoted to plans for redeveloping Lower Manhattan, creation of a permanent memorial for 9/11. Jacob Javits Center, Manhattan. www.listeningtothecity.org, 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 19, 10am Congestion Management System Plan Advisory Committee meeting. South Western Regional Planning Agency, 888 Washington Boulevard, Stamford. www.swrpa.org/projects/cmp2020.htm or 203-316-5190.

July 25, noon NYC Transit Riders Council meeting. 347 Madison Avenue, 5th Floor Board Room. 212-878-7087 or mail@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. 212-629-8080 or bridgecounts@transalt.org.

more calendars items at www.tstc.org