

Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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NEWS

Brooklyn's Case for East River Tolls

On August 5, the Brooklyn Paper ran letters to the editor supporting tolls on city-owned East River bridges. The letters responded to a story on the Quinnipiac University poll showing that New Yorkers favor East River bridge tolls over a subway and bus fare hike 2 to 1 (MTR #375). Some highlights:

"As a Brooklyn resident, I fully support tolls on East River crossings. With **mass transit across the bridges readily available**, those who choose to take cars into the city (what a terrible idea!) should pay for the privilege."

"I say **bring on the bridge tolls!** Those of us who live in the districts surrounding the East River bridges suffer greatly from the daily barrage of automobile commuters. The traffic is a nightmare at all hours, the pollution grows worse every day and the noise alone is like having an airport runway in your backyard... Thankfully, **we finally have a mayor who has shown some sense** on this issue... This city is the only one in America where car owners are a minority. Drivers have been getting a free ride on the East River bridges for 50 years. It's time for the few to stop ruining the lives of the many."

"Just about everyone I know feels it will finally **mitigate our overwhelming traffic woes** and bring back quality of life to our streets... Tolls make sense for the long-term future of Brooklyn: it's too bad that we have some elected leaders who don't seem to realize it. The people do, and they have spoken."

"Roy Vanasco of Community Board 2 repeated the canard of toll plazas causing traffic backups and pollution. But East River tolls will be non-cash, with no toll plazas. **Traffic will actually flow more smoothly** as some drivers leave their cars at home once in a while to save money."

"With tolls, the air will be cleaner, the streets less noisy, **drivers will get to where they need to go quicker**, goods will get on shelves faster, deliveries will be on time, children will have fewer health problems, families will spend more time together, and the number of pedestrians and cyclists killed and injured by cars should decline."

Ball Dropped on Phelps-Dodge Rail Yard ?

At a NYMTC freight meeting in July, officials reported that the Galasso firm, which specializes in truck-based moving, storage, transfer and warehousing, has purchased an option on the 38-acre Phelps-Dodge industrial site in **Maspeth, Queens**. The unused site had been identified by planners as a critical component for the eventual function of a Cross-Harbor rail freight tunnel and expansion of freight rail activity generally in New York City. Calls to the Galasso firm for more details were unproductive.

At a meeting with Governor Pataki's representatives, and staff from the NYC EDC, Empire State Development Corp., the Port Authority, NY State DOT and rail freight advocates in spring, 2001, purchase of the 37-acre Phelps-Dodge site was determined to be NY State's highest priority in advancing the rail freight capacity agenda downstate.

It's not clear who dropped the ball, though the city, state and Port Authority appeared to be dancing around the issue of **who should pay** for it earlier on.

Additionally, very little has been heard from NY State's other major rail yard initiative — an examination of the suitability of the Pilgrim State Hospital site in Suffolk County — over the last several years.

The Queens site connects directly to the LIRR Montauk Branch line, with nearby links to Brooklyn's 65th Street Yard and float terminals, the East River Hell Gate Bridge and the LIRR network.

Yard space is a critical issue for the region. Without **more capacity to switch freight between trains and trucks**, New York City will be hard-pressed to take advantage of any new rail access created by a cross-harbor tunnel or active harbor rail/barge float system. Congressman Nadler urged public purchase of the Phelps-Dodge site early in 2001 (MTR #310).

Curry Blames Rowland for CT's Gridlock

Democratic gubernatorial hopeful Bill Curry blasted Governor John Rowland's transportation record last Thursday, calling the work of the state's Transportation Strategy Board "too little, too late." Curry criticized Rowland for not undertaking a review of transportation policy until **seven years into his administration**. He also attacked the governor for earlier moves, like his attempts to **eliminate Shore**

Line East and Metro-North's Danbury and Waterbury branches, and reduction of the bus budget.

Curry and his running mate, State Senator George Jepsen of Stamford, spoke at a press conference in Norwalk where they spotlighted economic impacts of Fairfield County's now-legendary gridlock. "There is no vision for 21st Century planning," Curry said.

A policy statement on Curry's campaign web-site says Rowland reduced funding for the Transportation Strategy Board as soon as its work began.

Curry also said on Thursday a **casino in Bridgeport** would be the "ultimate transportation disaster" for the I-95 corridor and criticized Rowland for not opposing the project.

Curry said he would develop tax incentives for urban development and try to address land use practices that fuel sprawl. His transportation policy statement reads: "Going forward, there really is only one solution, and while it's not the best short-term fix, if done properly, it will help us fix our transportation system once and for all. It's called **land-use planning**, and it's something we desperately need. By coordinating our transportation needs with our economic development and environmental concerns, we can produce a plan that provides a roadmap for getting us out of this mess."

A Rowland spokesperson told reporters that Rowland opposed additional casinos in Connecticut, and

New Shore Trains Attract Metro-North Riders

Recent ridership data from Shore Line East's new through service from Old Saybrook to Stamford demonstrates that Metro-North's New Haven line has been **starved for capacity** and better **intra-Connecticut express** service.

The numbers show the service is attracting fewer riders from east of New Haven than it is **capturing Metro-North riders** traveling between New Haven and Stamford.

Overall use of the trains has tripled since the through-service began last December. But more than half of the riders are from New Haven or points west, who are using the Shore Line East trains as a better option for Stamford travel. Two trains in each direction are now moving about 600 daily passengers.

The Shore Line East trains accept Metro-North tickets and **make far fewer stops** than Metro-North local runs. CT DOT officials believe ridership east of New Haven will pick up once capacity on I-95 in New Haven is severely impacted by the Q-Bridge reconstruction project later this year. Initial funding for the through-trains expires this winter. The state's Transportation Strategy Board will make a recommendation on whether to continue it this fall.

pointed to various transportation infrastructure projects. She accused Curry of proposing billion-dollar programs **without a financing plan**.

The state's "transportation summit" in 2000 lent hope that Connecticut might go in a new policy direction, but follow up has become a largely uninspiring study process that has so far failed to grapple with major finance and land use issues. Meanwhile, ConnDOT proceeds with a series of traffic- and sprawl-inducing highway widenings and extensions.

City Still Stalling Car-Free Park Trial

A meeting last Monday between officials who support a three-month car-free trial in Prospect Park and those who oppose it yielded little progress on the issue. NYC Transportation Commissioner Iris Weinshall has endorsed the status quo, which permits heavy auto use during peak traffic times and overnight. She met with Councilmembers Yvette Clarke, James Davis, Bill deBlasio, Angel Rodriguez and David Yassky who support the trial ban. Park Administrator Tupper Thomas, who also supports the trial, and Borough President Marty Markowitz, who has not come out strongly either way on the issue and two Councilmembers who oppose the trial, Simcha Felder and Michael Nelson, also took part.

The city DOT's position is that it needs to do more traffic counts before considering a trial ban. DOT spokesman Tom Cocola told the *Daily News* the agency would like to look at traffic data before, during and after a trial ban, which would cost \$250,000. The agency's approach would also postpone the start of a trial until the spring of 2004, as baseline traffic numbers would be collected in 2003.

These issues are likely bureaucratic tactics to smother the issue. According to Transportation Alternatives, which has spearheaded the car-free park effort, Commissioner Weinshall has said that DOT's is too short staffed to undertake a traffic study.

Stronger support from elected officials – including Marty Markowitz and NYC Mayor Michael Bloomberg – could convince DOT to go forward.

"Boulevard of Death:" Residents Still Wary

In a recent Discovery Channel feature on the most dangerous roads in America, Queens civic activists said city improvements by the city Queens Boulevard's pedestrian death toll have not gone far enough to make the avenue reasonably safe for those on foot.

The program, "Deadly Crossings: American Intersections," highlighted the nation's three worst roads.

"Queens Boulevard has been used as a speed highway for cars," said Robert Chwat, who appeared in the program. "There has been a fight between the

(pedestrians) and the cars and the cars win.”

Just from 1998 to 2000, 18 bicyclists and pedestrians died as a result of crashes with cars on Queens Boulevard, which is 2.41 deaths per mile of roadway (MTR #308).

Despite its high fatality rate, the NYC DOT has yet to plan the comprehensive changes that would make Queens Boulevard safer and more people-friendly. City transportation commissioner Iris Weinshall told *Newsday* in 2001, “We didn’t need to throw the whole thing out and build a new road.” She said lower speed limits, more pedestrian crossing time, additional parking in service roads and police presence reduced car-pedestrian crashes on the boulevard by 21% during the first half of 2001 (MTR #328).

Nassau Hub Planning Back on Track ?

The Suozzi administration is trying to reinvigorate the planning and development process for the “Nassau Hub” – the collection of major retail, office, educational and recreational attractions in central Nassau County that some hope could become a **coherent, more urbanized commercial center**. Transit ideas for the Nassau Hub were laid out in a 1998 concept study that several organizations, including the Regional Plan Association, contributed to under the aegis of the Long Island Regional Planning Board. Subsequently, funding was secured by Nassau County and Reps. Carolyn McCarthy and Peter King to begin an official process toward some form of additional transit in the “hub” area.

In response, civic activists led by the Long Island Neighborhood Network established the **Nassau Hub Citizens Advisory Committee** to ensure that communities surrounding the hub would have a strong say in the planning process. They are concerned that a hub plan is not exclusively developer-driven, and that transit investments make sense county-wide. The Committee has hosted several valuable sessions where well-known “new urbanist” planners looked at intelligent, people-oriented ways to plan in-fill development in the hub and surrounding areas.

The entire effort became moribund in the waning days of the Gulotta administration. Now, however, County government is **preparing to accept bids** for the major investment study. The work will likely remain relatively preliminary because only \$625,000 is available for the contract. The study could be underway this winter.

The city says that since it started implementing safety measures in 1999, fatalities along the boulevard have decreased by half. However, it’s not clear whether restrictions like fencing or the modest pedestrian amenities are producing the results (MTR #363).

Residents would prefer comprehensive changes to reverse Queens Boulevard’s transformation from a people-friendly “boulevard” to an urban highway.

NY State Plan: Trucks R Us

At a recent NYMTC meeting, NYSDOT planners provided an overview of their near-final “NYC Arterial Freight Study.” Though it has five options, common themes run throughout, including:

- Build truckways to separate trucks from non-commercial traffic;
- Concentrate trucks rather than scatter them throughout the region;
- Add special use lanes to highways (transit during peak, HOV the rest of the day, trucks at night);
- Identify and correct key truck bottlenecks (due to sight distance, clearance, radii, etc.);
- Informational signs/ITS/web directions and restrictions;
- Access and curb-space issues.

NYSDOT offered that the truck trip numbers for some areas “didn’t look right” and were being revisited, based on projects modeled in the study. Some of the projects being examined are allowing smaller trucks on parkways, paving part of the Bay Ridge line right of way for trucks, building a **new truckway** from the LIE **across the Hell Gate Bridge** to the Harlem River Yard, extending the Clearview Expressway, building a connection from the 65th St. Yard to the Gowanus, and rebuilding the Hunts Point interchange and directly connecting it and the Harlem River Yard to the Bruckner Expressway.

Participants noted that making a **truckway along the Bay Ridge line** could flood Staten Island with additional trucks since trucks pay no toll eastbound on the Verrazano Bridge. Comments like “over my dead body” greeted the proposal.

Audience reaction to the overall plan was generally negative. Fred Krebs, President of the NY & Atlantic Railway said, “You’re making it **cheaper and kinder for 102-inch wide trucks**, which will increase truck traffic. You need to get the transfer stations outside of the city.” The audience requested a presentation on how freight distribution centers outside of major European cities work to reduce in-city truck traffic. There, break-bulk activities occur in ex-urban distribution centers. Transferred loads are stepped-down to

The Tri-State Transportation Campaign web site:

www.tstc.org

smaller trucks that are friendlier to city streets.

The arterial freight study appears to have little connection to other related analyses such as the South Brooklyn Transportation Study or the NYCDOT Truck Route Study.

Bay Head Yard Freed From Diesel Refueling

New Jersey Transit announced in late July that it has cut diesel refueling out of its plan to modify the Bay Head rail yard (MTR #364). NJ Transit will also shift funding for the project from federal to state sources, meaning it will not have to resubmit a federal environmental assessment.

The Tri-State Campaign and other groups pushed for a full environmental impact study to include analysis of **electrifying the North Jersey Coast Line** south of Long Branch, to Bay Head. While that study will not take place, NJ Transit's changes do avoid locking the line into diesel for the foreseeable future.

Electrification is the best choice for towns, the environment and passengers, who would benefit from a one-seat ride to Manhattan. The Coast Line is already electrified from Rahway, where it diverges from the Northeast Corridor, to Long Branch. That progress should now continue to the Bay Head terminal.

Under NJ Transit's revised plan, locomotives will go to a new high-speed refueling station in Hoboken, which will open in Spring 2003. Because the locomotives currently used by NJ Transit can run for only two days without refueling, the plan will initially cause tight scheduling. In 2004, locomotives with double the fuel capacity will be delivered, easing demand at Hoboken.

The revised Bay Head project removes refueling tankers and eliminates a nine-track canopy and high-mast lights — elements of the original plan that met with **strident community opposition**. The plan still includes cleaning up diesel fuel spills and installing a brake inspection pit and directional lighting. Electrical and compressed air equipment will also be installed, allowing locomotives to shut down for the night during warm months.

Construction for the improvements at Bay Head may begin in 2003 and last until 2005. The plan's modifications will also cut \$4 million from the projected \$16 million cost, according to NJ Transit.

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



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Calendar

August 13, Noon New York City Transit Riders Council. 5th Floor Board Room, 347 Madison Avenue, Manhattan. 212-878-7087 or www.pcac.org

August 20, 6:30pm Canal Transportation Plan meeting. Southold Recreation Center, 970 Peconic Lane, Peconic. 718-472-3177 or atyrell@gw.dot.state.ny.us

August 22, 5:30-7:30 Transportation Research Forum, "Similarities Between Present Rail in United Kingdom and U.S. Rail in the 1970's" Don Nelson, Vice President of and Transit, the Washington Group. 212-435-4226 and www.trfweb.org

August 23, 7-10am Join Transportation Alternatives to document the number of bicyclists crossing Manhattan's East River Bridges. 212-629-8080 or www.transalt.org

August 27, 6-8pm Auto-Free New York Meeting, "Lower Manhattan Rebuilding - Putting Pedestrians First," briefing and walking tour, George Haikalis, 104 Washington St., Manhattan. 212-475-3394 or www.auto-free.org

September 12, 5pm Voorhees Transportation Center Speaker Series, "Making National Transportation Policy: The Next Surface Transportation Act," Emil Frankel, U.S. DOT Asst. Secretary for Policy. Bloustein School, 33 Livingston Ave., New Brunswick. 732-932-6812 or cdanku@rci.rutgers.edu

September 12 - 14 Planning Outside the Box: Connecting Plans and People, American Planning Association Region I Fall Conference Providence, RI mlevine@nyplanning.org

September 24, 6-8pm Auto-Free New York Meeting, "Transportation: the Architecture of Place," Alex Marshall, journalist and urban scholar. 212-475-3394 or www.auto-free.org

October 18, 8:30- 4:30pm Assoc. of NJ Environmental Commissions Congress. "What's Ailing Us? The Sprawl- Health Connection." Busch Campus, Rutgers University, Piscataway. 609-278-5088 or www.anjec.org

more calendar entries at www.tstc.org