

# Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

Number 383

September 16, 2002

## NEWS

### Metropolitan Transportation and the September 11 Crisis: Fragility and Resilience

The metropolitan region's transportation system has not fully recovered from the destruction wrought by last year's September 11 attack. Yet hard work and smart improvisation by the system's employees and managers has kept the region moving. The crisis showed the vulnerability of some parts of our mass transit system – notably, connections between New Jersey and New York City – where too few links operate too close to full capacity. But it also demonstrated the potentials of a region that, before last fall, had only begun to tap opportunities to return more of its transportation activity to our ample waterways, and to use its extensive highway and street system more efficiently.

Because September 11 also briefly grounded the U.S. airline system and has led to at least a medium-term drop off in demand for air travel, it raised the national question of how to develop a well-planned, flexible and sufficiently redundant **inter-city travel** system much more starkly than past debates over Amtrak, highway gridlock and airline subsidies. While Amtrak attracted grounded passengers in the northeast corridor last fall, its financial and technical travails showed that even the rail system's best components remain an **exceedingly frail part** of our transportation network. The disappointing response to Amtrak's troubles by the Bush administration and many in Congress suggest the country at large may be far slower than the NY metropolitan region to learn any transportation lessons from September 11.

This is true in an even broader sense as well. As the *New York Times* recently observed, "It is hard to imagine a sharper reminder of America's **dependence on the volatile regimes of the Middle East for their oil** than the events of September 11." But despite a public mood that would have embraced initiatives to cut oil dependence, the country's leaders avoided the problem. A national administration led primarily by old-school energy industry executives is now fixated on returning the U.S. to war in the Middle East. While we will not speculate on the future of international relations and the global economy, it appears irrefutable that the costs of oil dependence are rising. At some point, this may affect U.S. competitiveness versus countries whose transportation systems are more balanced and less profligate in their use of transportation energy resources.

This week, however, we focus on metropolitan issues. We will discuss these national questions in more depth next week.

### Multi-Modal Transportation to the Rescue

The reopening this week of the 1 and 9 subway lines downtown, and the fact that subway ridership has not declined over the past year, attests to the huge effort mounted by **NYC Transit** to adapt the system to its infrastructure losses and begin rebuilding the downtown line as soon and quickly as humanly possible. **NJ Transit** too has been successful in adding seats to its Penn Station NY lines to cope with the flood of displaced PATH riders, but its network is obviously far less flexible than the 23-line, amply interconnected subway system.

The **NYC DOT, Port Authority**, private operators and federal emergency officials also deserve high marks for their work to augment and organize the **ferry flotilla** that is helping to fill in for downtown PATH service, and serving other water corridors as well. After the onset of traffic chaos in mid-September, the city's traffic managers were able to stay a step ahead of an ever-changing situation, managing street space downtown to accommodate everyday life, recovery efforts, debris clean up and removal, temporary utility lines, bus parking and other needs. Those efforts have begun to address longer-term traffic efficiency problems, such as the March increase in the occupancy standard for the **Gowanus HOV lane** and the Church Street busway.

Are there major transportation legacies and lessons for the region from the last year's experience? We believe there are several.

First, while New York's decision makers tend to downplay or ignore it, the crisis spotlighted again the trans-Hudson aspects of our metropolitan economy – the numbers of the lost and the memorial services across northern New Jersey towns last week tragically attested to the symbiosis between residential New Jersey and the Manhattan job market.

## Jersey Commute Hardest Hit

But the mass transit links underpinning that relationship are inadequate. Planners know this, but have been hitherto unable to bring the problem to the fore, in part because of the problem of forging a bi-state approach. Compare the transit lines crossing the Hudson to those crossing the East and Harlem Rivers. **Sixteen sets of subway tracks** run under or over the latter. **Only two cross the Hudson.** New Jersey commuter trains are linked by a single tunnel to Penn Station NY. That is also currently true of the Long Island Railroad, but the lower level of the 63<sup>rd</sup> Street tunnel is available for commuter rail access, and the LIRR East Side Access project is on its way to connecting it to Grand Central Terminal. There is also more infrastructure flexibility in Metro-North's access to Manhattan. If there was room at Penn Station, Metro-North's Hudson Line could serve it in short order via the bridge at Spuyten Duyvil and Amtrak's West Side line. Likewise, only Penn Station constraints prevent New Haven line trains from using Amtrak's Hell Gate route to reach the West Side. **MTA projects and planning** are moving forward to **realize these potentials.**

Even without these improvements, the commuter lines east and north of the city could serve Manhattan in a crisis that affected Midtown because many of their smaller stations in the Bronx, Queens and Brooklyn permit **easy transfers to the vast, flexible subway system.** If Penn Station were disabled, that would simply not be the case for commuters from New Jersey – rush hour PATH trains operated close enough to capacity before September 11 that a big influx of NJ Transit riders could not fit.

Crisis and redundancy planning aside, demand for rail access from New Jersey to Manhattan is growing. NJ Transit projects in the works for years are significantly increasing the capacity for one-seat or easy two-seat Manhattan trips, but they are running up against the Hudson tunnel/Penn Station bottleneck. Senators Torricelli and Corzine say a **second commuter rail tunnel from NJ to Manhattan** will be their top priority in next year's federal transportation reauthorization. New York's Congressional delegation should also back the project. For all the talk about building LIRR and Metro-North links downtown, it is more important to ensure that it gets easier for New Jersey workers to reach Manhattan.

## Not Missed: SOV Commuters

Second, the Manhattan carpool rule instituted in mid-September, 2001 showed that rush hour, single-occupant motoring to the core of Manhattan is **a luxury the city does not need to indulge.** While many news reports predictably focused on drivers

who felt hassled by the restriction, a very small number of commuters reach the central business district driving alone. This drive-alone cadre can be absorbed by ridesharing and the vast transit system without a blip. **The rule was largely accepted by the public.** The main challenge came from a small, directly affected group – Manhattan parking garage owners – who marshaled only feeble, undocumented arguments. The mayor's decision to lift the rule in Midtown last spring likely means that the carpool rule still technically in force for crossings leading downtown (many question the efficacy of its enforcement these days) will not endure for the long term. To try to keep the carpool rule in place will excite property owners and other interests who feel lower Manhattan is perennially disadvantaged relative to Midtown, building stronger force against it than before.

It is possible that the rule's ability to cut congestion without other major impacts could grow into support for other traffic management policies. The Bloomberg administration continues to express interest in **East River bridge tolls**, addressing both driving demand and revenue problems. Opinion polls show that a majority of city residents view **a transit fare increase as less acceptable** than tolls on the free bridges.

Other beneficial, residual changes from the carpool rule and various other restrictions downtown may be more bus or HOV capacity at certain crossings or routes (the city studied HOV lanes for the Williamsburg Bridge years ago, before its big overhaul began, and the Port Authority has expressed interest in more HOV capacity for the Lincoln Tunnel). The Gowanus HOV-3 lane is an outgrowth of the post-September traffic rules, although the need for a stronger standard had been growing for years. The Church Street busway builds on the Gowanus change. Additionally, the maintenance of tough rules for **truck access to the Holland Tunnel** (west-bound trucks banned and east-bound trucks restricted to those with two or three axles) is so popular that it stands a chance of remaining in place.

## A Better Planning Environment?

Some of the new transport policies and capacity in place in the region are at least in part a product of much **greater inter-agency communication** and consultation than took place before last September. During the immediate crisis, transportation managers from different agencies met together on a very frequent basis. Overall transportation policy has been

The Tri-State Transportation Campaign web site:

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hampered for decades by the fragmentation of responsibilities between agencies that report to different bosses and rarely work together. Some observers say that the spirit and function of cooperation has persisted. This may **augur well for bus rapid**

### **A Call on McGreevey to Honor Sprawl-Fighting Pledges**

Twenty New Jersey transportation, environmental and civic groups sent a letter last week to Governor James McGreevey, urging him to cancel the North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority's plans to **add many highway widening and bypass projects** to its capital project pipeline. The Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) and the newly revised Regional Transportation Plan – which will be voted on during a September 17 meeting – propose scores of new highway capacity projects (*MTR #382*).

Governor McGreevey wants to be a leader on smart growth. Yet many of the proposed highway projects run **contrary to the smart growth principles** advanced in the Governor's executive order," said Janine Bauer, Tri-State Transportation Campaign executive director. "The sprawl impacts of these widenings and bypasses should be evaluated now, before money and time is wasted on designing them."

The groups urged McGreevey to stop the projects until the Smart Growth Council, which he created through an executive order, has a chance to develop guidelines. Under Executive Order 4, sprawl impacts of highway s have to be considered according to a set of criteria that is not yet finalized (*MTR #351*).

In addition to his broad position on sprawl, McGreevey has also taken a public stand against at least one of the projects advanced in NJTPA's project list – **Route 15**. In response to a New Jersey Environmental Federation candidate's questionnaire during the gubernatorial campaign, McGreevey wrote, "I believe that we need to thoroughly examine the benefits and disadvantages of Route 15, before we decide to spend millions of taxpayer dollars on its construction." That evaluation has not taken place.

Governor McGreevey and state transportation commissioner James Fox have the authority to ask for changes to the Regional Transportation Plan. If the projects are approved for "study and development" during the September 17<sup>th</sup> meeting, McGreevey has **ten days to veto the minutes**.

"Taking a stand against some of the bad projects in the plan would show real leadership from the McGreevey administration on the issue of stopping sprawl," said Marie Curtis, executive director of the New Jersey Environmental Lobby. "We urge the Governor to stop this plan to build more highways through some of New Jersey's most sensitive land."

**transit** and other projects, but the jury remains out on whether a real break from business as usual has been made. The issue would be less important if elected leaders articulated clearer transportation priorities.

### **London Set to Launch Pricing Cordon**

London – a city with traffic and congestion problems comparable to New York's – is about to actually do something about it. Beginning in February, motorists who enter an eight square mile area of central London between 7am and 6:30pm will pay a **daily fee of £5** (about \$7.80). Mayor Ken Livingstone speculates that the congestion pricing program will reduce traffic in the area by 20 to 30 percent.

London's transportation commissioner said last week he wants the pricing scheme to last at least two years, according to the *London Times*. Livingstone, who won the city's first mayoral election in 2000 in part because of his **promise to attack congestion**, has also vowed to stand behind the program. Parliament gave the mayor the power to implement "congestion charges" in the same 1999 act that created the mayoralty (*MTR #289*).

Two weeks ago, comments made by the mayor were widely interpreted to mean that the project would be scrapped if it wasn't working within two months. However, the mayor's office issued strong clarifications last week, explaining that only a major technical glitch would cause the program to be suspended that quickly.

Under the program, single fees will be payable by phone or over the internet, and weekly, monthly and yearly passes will also be available. The system will be enforced by a **network of cameras** poised at the area's perimeter, in conjunction with a computer system that will match license plates on the road to those whose fees have been paid. Livingstone decided not to use electronic toll transponders, favored in Singapore and Norway for congestion-pricing cordons, in order to get the system in place more quickly.

Livingstone has publicly vowed to leave the fee at £5 through his current term in office, which ends in May, 2004. The program is expected to raise over \$200 million a year, which will be invested public transportation. Since taking office, Livingstone has added more bus-only and bicycle lanes, created a pedestrian-only zone downtown and changed traffic signal timing to allow pedestrians more time to cross. Critics accuse the mayor of a personal anti-car bias.

New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who shares with Livingstone the habit of commuting to work by transit, could take a cue from his London counterpart. While Bloomberg recently has shown some interest in traffic experiments, he is hesitant on simple matters like car-free parks. The mayor's inter-

est in East River bridge tolls could be more significant than any of these other issues, but it is far from clear where the city administration will go on issue.

A recent article in the *New Yorker* surveyed transportation and traffic issues in the post-September 11 cityscape and noted that the next year is likely to be a **crossroads in NYC traffic policy**:

“Will New York, which is planning to build a state-of-the-art transit center in lower Manhattan, be the first city to implement a state-of-the-art traffic policy?” Seabrook asked, after a discussion of the carpool rule’s traffic-reducing impacts. “Or will this period in the city’s traffic history—a period in which the automobile is a privileged guest—end in the coming months, defeated by our insatiable desire to drive?” asked writer John Seabrook

Looking to London and other cities, Seabrook called for a congestion pricing cordon around the Manhattan central business district. He called the free East River bridges “the **single most irrational** traffic-management practice in New York City.”

#### NJ’s Crumbling Bridges: Town Gets Protection

Officials from Hillside Township in Union County, NJ, have finally seen requested emergency action by NJ DOT. Metal netting has now been installed to prevent **falling concrete chunks** from a Route 22 overpass from hitting people or cars below. Several fragments fell off the bridge last year.

New Jersey DOT spokesman Micah Rasmussen told the paper that, while a new bridge is needed, lack of funding would put off its replacement for seven to ten years. Rasmussen said that the state has a **huge backlog of deficient bridges**, but that municipalities have to understand that there is not enough money to meet all requests. However, Rasmussen is understating the role that DOT has in deciding how transportation funding is spent. If money slated to add more highways across the state was **instead spent on repair**, the backlog of crumbling structures could be reduced, and avoided in the future.

Hillside officials have requested replacement of the Route 22 overpass, the North Broad Street bridge, and a Conrail rail freight line. Township officials began asking for the emergency netting last October.

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



Mobilizing the Region

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## Calendar

**September 17, 10am to noon** Milano Graduate School Public Seminar, “Carried Away: Resolving New York’s Garbage Crisis.” Wolff Conference Room, 65 Fifth Avenue.

**September 17, 4:15-6:15pm or 6:45-8:45 pm** Long Island Sound Waterborne Transportation Plan Community Planning Workshop. Stamford Gov’t Center, 2nd Floor. 888 Washington Boulevard, Stamford. 917-339-0488 or crya@hshassoc.com

**September 17, 6-8pm** Southern Brooklyn Transportation Investment Study Community Liaison Committee. Brooklyn College Student Center, East 27th St./Campus Road, 4th Floor Jefferson Williams Lounge, Brooklyn. 212-799-8803 x24 or www.southernbrooklyntis.com

**September 18, 9am-4:30pm** “What’s Ailing Us? The Sprawl-Health Connection,” 2002 New Jersey Environmental Congress. Busch Campus Center, Rutgers University, Piscataway. 973-539-7547 or www.anjec.org

**September 18, 3-7pm** Public scoping meeting for widening of Route 9 in Ocean County, NJ. Lakewood Municipal Building, 231 Third Street, Lakewood. 609-530-4899.

**September 19, 4:15-6:15pm or 6:45-8:45 pm** Long Island Sound Waterborne Transportation Plan Community Planning Workshop. Fire Island Park, LeFevre Lane (off East Main Street, Route 1), New Rochelle. 917-339-0488 or crya@hshassoc.com

**September 24, 4:15-6:15pm or 6:45-8:45 pm** Long Island Sound Waterborne Transportation Plan Community Planning Workshop. One Bowling Green, Basement Meeting Room #2, Manhattan. 917-339-0488 or crya@hshassoc.com

**September 24, 6pm** Public Hearing on Proposed Weekly UniTicket/UniRail for MTA Metro-North. MTA Headquarters, 347 Madison Avenue, 5th Floor Manhattan. 212-878-7483 or www.mta.info

**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** 2002 Environmental Congress. “What’s Ailing Us? The Sprawl- Health Connection.” Busch Campus, Rutgers University, Piscataway. www.anjec.org

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