

Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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NEWS

Diesel Purchase Linked to Express Buses

Although we reported last summer that NYC was considering an end to its “no more diesels” bus purchase policy (*MTR #369*), recent reports suggest the issue is more nuanced than simple budget-cutting.

Since the city began buying only compressed natural gas (CNG) buses for its franchise bus fleet in the mid-1990s, it has not had to buy new express (over-the-road) buses. It now faces the need to **replace 300** of these buses. Apparently, there are no CNG express buses on the market that meet the city’s specifications. The city does appear to be ready to buy CNG-powered models for 60 local transit buses.

Since some organizations that follow bus industry and emissions developments now say that buses using **ultra-low sulfur diesel** along with engines outfitted with soot filters closely approach the pollution savings of CNG-fueled buses, the city may be able to head off environmental criticism if its express buses meet those conditions.

Ads Blasting Long Island Road Plan Hit the Airwaves

Rethink LITP 2000, a coalition of groups opposed to NY State DOT plans to widen most major Long Island highways, launched three ads last week on cable news channels. They encourage viewers to call Governor Pataki to express opposition to the plan, which would add at least **190 new lane-miles** of roadway and cost \$5 billion over the next 20 years.

The spots argue that road widenings — even the HOV lanes — as LITP 2000 proposes, will not solve Long Island’s congestion problems or lessen the number of vehicles on the road. Despite a huge investment to widen the Long Island Expressway with HOV lanes over the last decade, U.S. Census data show that **carpooling has declined** (*MTR #368*). The ads say Long Islanders should not have to suffer years of construction delays and expend resources on a plan that will do little to ease traffic, instead likely worsening traffic-inducing sprawl development.

Transportation reform groups have been making these points for several years, to little response from NYSDOT. The ads can be viewed on-line at: **www.tstc.org**. Governor Pataki’s office can be reached at 212-681-4580.

Transit Priorities All Over the NYC Map

NYC Transit recently began its planning study for extending the #7 subway train from Times Square to the Javitz Center area. Meanwhile, a new report from lower Manhattan business interests represents the latest broadside in their fight to win a commitment for **direct suburb-downtown rail links**.

The biggest concern for transit advocates amid all the proposals is whether the MTA capital budget can sustain 3-4 major system expansion projects at once without bogging down, while continuing to make progress improving the existing system for its **millions of daily riders**.

Neither the Second Avenue subway nor the LIRR-Grand Central link projects are close to full swing. They will cost billions, and take ten years or longer.

The Bloomberg administration clearly wants the #7 extension in place early **within that same time-frame**, to bolster the city’s bid for the 2012 Olympic games. Downtown real estate holders are also pressing commuter rail access in the context of post-September 11 rebuilding, not as a capacity issue for future generations.

In a letter to the *NY Times* last week, Manhattan Borough President and Second Avenue subway backer C. Virginia Fields warned that, “With a limited pot of money, we must focus on projects that can provide additional capacity and connections and be operational in the shortest time.” She wrote that the project was closer to ground-breaking than proposals for lower Manhattan suburban rail. “The Second Avenue subway will provide major new capacity plus service downtown. It will also take pressure off the Lexington Avenue line, helping Metro-North and Long Island Rail Road riders and giving subway riders from the Bronx and Brooklyn new options,” the letter said. Even the most feasible concepts for bringing commuter rail downtown will entail years of debate and planning, and possible conflict with subway riders and advocates (*MTR #355*).

The #7 extension study begun by the MTA will cost \$41 million and run for about four years. The Bloomberg administration says a **tax increment financing** plan will prevent the project from competing with other elements in the MTA capital program.

Critics say the funding scheme is unproven, and that breaking ground on the project will risk dumping it back on the MTA's uncertain finances.

The critics' case was bolstered by a report issued last week by the NYC Independent Budget Office. It detailed potential problems with tax-increment financing, which allows a municipality to borrow against projected property tax revenue gains.

The brief pointed out that tax-increment financing (TIF) has never been used in New York City and has **never been used** to fund a project nearly as **expensive** as the \$1.5 billion No. 7 project.

The largest TIF-funded project identified by the report was a joint venture (as more expensive projects typically are) between the city of Indianapolis, Indiana and United Airlines. Indianapolis raised \$244 million with TIF. New York City is planning on paying for the entire #7 project with TIF.

In some cases, TIF schemes have not generated as much revenue as predicted. A California study of 38 TIF projects found that only eight generated 80% or more of their costs in tax revenue gains.

Because the #7 TIF plan is predicated on the launch of major developments on midtown's far west side, some also question whether it will compete with the need to revitalize lower Manhattan's economy. The IBO will release a comprehensive report addressing the viability of using tax increment financing for the #7 subway extension at a later date.

New FDR Ramps in Downtown Biz Wish-List

In addition to listing concepts that have come up in a variety of forms over the past year – such as commuter rail access and burying parts of West Street – the downtown business groups' paper recommends the ludicrous idea of constructing new highway ramps from the FDR Drive into downtown's east side. This feature went unreported in newspaper accounts.

The paper cites "congested streets and poor access to the FDR" as problematic. But the idea seems **Robert Moses-like**: impose highway infrastructure upon a dense urban fabric for the convenience of a few drivers. It's difficult to imagine the placement of such ramps. Do building owners along Fulton or Wall Streets really want floods of traffic being dumped from the FDR straight to their front curbs?

Is there an *MTR* reader willing to suggest how such ramps might be accommodated? Which street should be destroyed to save drivers a few minutes.

Improving "Trans-Stat"

The information NYC DOT contributed to the FY2002 **mayor's management report**, released last week, seems a significant improvement over the Department's accountability measures developed last year. The latter, dubbed "M.O.V.E.," responded to Mayor Giuliani's insistence that all city agencies develop performance measures along the lines of the NYPD's "comp-stat."

Last year, we criticized M.O.V.E. (MTR #333) as largely self-referential, measuring **agency preoccupations** like "construction permits issued" more than real-world transportation conditions.

The newest mayor's report, in contrast, does lay out some basic measures of system performance. Its tables on infrastructure conditions, for instance, show that **bridges** are being brought into **better repair**, but pavement is worse than a few years ago. The percent of NYC bridges rated as good or very good has improved to 37.8%. Still, more context for the information would go a long way. The relatively low rate of good bridges suggests the repair effort is still largely a catch-up one. Some text stating the situation clearly would be helpful, as would a rough target date for a state of good repair. An assurance that recent bridge overhaul work is now being protected by regular maintenance would also be heartening. Is the cost of reducing bridge deficiencies rising or falling, and why? These are not just academic issues. The huge investment to fix bridges affects the rest of the capital budget, from new schools to better parks.

The report's pavement rating does contain figures on unit-costs of street resurfacing, and indeed shows that asphalt prices have spiked 20% since 1998. Why, and what can be done about it? New Yorkers may be skeptical that DOT rates **82.4% of city streets** as having "**good**" pavement, and only .2% as "poor" ("good" is down from 85.8% in 1999, but a hair better than last year). The borough with the least "good" streets is Brooklyn at 79.1%. Some definition of what good pavement looks and feels like would be a welcome addition. Is the test vehicle a Humvee or a bicycle? What is the chief cause of bad pavement – weather, time, trucks or shoddy utility work?

Traffic fatalities in the city increased slightly from FY01 — 9 more car driver and passenger deaths and 3 more cyclists and pedestrians killed. It's unclear from this information what it means for the city to keep pace with traffic signal and sign installation, or to exceed its goal for speed hump installation. **Are these things increasing safety** in specific locales? Ends and means are still reported with little distinction. The report's text does discuss the Department's success reducing fatalities on Queens Boulevard.

The Tri-State Transportation Campaign web site:

www.tstc.org

The report also measures the safety impact of **red light cameras**. In 1999, summonses issued per camera jumped 43%. The rate has declined each year since, suggesting ongoing deterrence. The poor “readability rate” of license plate photos (56%) suggest the technology still has room to improve.

If you’ve ever wondered while dodging a suburban utility vehicle whose pilot’s attentions seem elsewhere, the NYPD issued 17,668 summonses this year for driving while cell-yakking.

The past year’s statistics on ferry ridership and franchise bus operations are heavily colored by the effects of the September 11 attack on the transportation system, and by the franchise bus strike. Heartening information on **increasing bikeway mileage** and bike parking opportunities could be anchored with data on the incidence of cycling — are the investments paying off in more bicycle riding?

Overall mode share, air pollution, traffic volume and congestion data would be welcome additions to future NYC DOT reports.

Editorial Trashes I-95 Expansion

The Stamford *Advocate* took proponents of double-decking I-95 and widening the Merrit Parkway (see *MTR #384*) to task in an editorial last week, saying that the ideas were **worthy only of denunciation**.

“We thought Connecticut might have learned from what has happened over the years in Southern California, where proliferation of highways — and the expansion of them later — simply encouraged more people to drive longer distances to their jobs,” the paper argued.

Incongruously, however, the paper backed the widening of U.S. Rte 7 and I-84, because they do not parallel commuter rail lines. The sprawl-traffic dynamic the paper identifies as a California problem will occur in these corridors just as readily.

Traffic Calming Proceeds in Huntington

Huntington supervisor Frank Petrone announced last week that the town would install a traffic calming roundabout at the intersection of Gerard St. and Clinton Avenue. The spot is locally **notorious for traffic chaos and a danger to those on foot**. The plan will cut down on the amount of pavement at the intersection and slow traffic. However, the roundabout design allows traffic to keep moving.

The project grew out of community revitalization workshops for Gerard Street organized by Sustainable Long Island and Vision Long Island. Though many municipalities around the world use roundabouts to calm traffic, it will be a relatively new technique for Long Island. The project should be in place by late fall. If it is successful, another will be installed at Gerard and Wall Streets.

The Fate of NJ’s Lite Rail

NJ Transportation Commissioner James Fox sharply criticized the Whitman administration for approving the **Trenton-to-Camden light rail** project during a legislative hearing last week. Fox distanced the McGreevey government from the project’s potential shortcomings: “In truth, this project would not have passed this administration’s smell test.”

Fox’s criticism is rooted in concerns that were raised when the project was initially discussed. Since the South Jersey light rail line passes through **lightly populated** Delaware River communities in Burlington and Camden Counties, parallel to **uncongested I-295**, ridership volumes may not be high enough to justify its cost (*MTR #220*).

Scheduling restrictions may further limit the number of passengers attracted to the line. The service will operate over a freight line which will be active at night. The light rail’s hours of operation will be between 6am and 10pm, people attending events at Mercer Sovereign Bank Arena or Tweeter Center in Camden will have difficulty using it.

However, these criticisms about the light rail project are far from new. Everyone knows the Whitman administration pushed the project through — even to the extent of **bypassing more rigorous evaluations** that would have enabled the federal government to foot the bill (*MTR #269*). NJ Transit opposed paying for a project that was unlikely to pass federal cost-efficiency standards.

However, now that the project is nearing completion, public statements from NJ officials should focus on making the best of the situation and **encouraging ridership** rather than complaining about previous administrations’ mis-steps or motivations.

NJ Transit director George Warrington seemed to take such a pragmatic approach, saying the agency will pursue a variety of service changes and outreach to boost ridership. During last week’s hearing, Warrington said bus schedules would be adjusted to complement light rail service, free transfers would be available from NJ Transit buses and joint tickets issued with Philadelphia commuter trains.

The Whitman administration touted the light rail line as a way to encourage revitalization and development in the corridor, which Warrington said was realistic. It will also be interesting to see how many motorists are captured by the new service. Other recent NJ Transit rail projects in northern New Jersey, such as the Midtown Direct on the Morris and Essex line, have **captured mostly bus riders**. Since there is little transit in the Trenton-Camden corridor, this project may do more to reduce auto trips than other recent NJ Transit projects.

Although the resources for South Jersey light rail may have been better spent, the same could certainly also be

said of the litany of **sprawl-producing highway projects** Fox voted into the study and development pipeline the previous week (MTR #384). Hopefully, the McGreevey administration will soon begin applying a "smell test" to expensive, sprawl-generating highway projects, rather than lavishing scarce transportation resources upon them.

Staten Island Freight Rail Link Slated for 2004

The Port Authority has purchased a parcel of New Jersey land that will enable freight rail service to be restored to Staten Island by 2004, according to the Staten Island *Advance*. The Union County parcel was the last major hurdle to reconnecting the Island to New Jersey's **Chemical Coast freight line**, after more than a decade of isolation from the country's freight rail network.

The freight line will serve both Howland Hook Marine Terminal and Visy Paper in Travis, and may be utilized to ship garbage out of state. Officials said six to 10 trains per day should be running by 2010.

Truck traffic is expected to drop by 56,000 a year on the **Goethals Bridge** after freight rail is restored (MTR #368). The EDC is also investing in a rehabilitation of Arlington Rail Yard, which will provide a truck-to-rail transfer station.

The Port Authority is also a month away from completing a feasibility study for using tracks between Port Richmond and the St. George Ferry Terminal for passenger rail service along the North Shore. Passenger rail was suspended on the line in 1953. The main obstacle to passenger service is the dismal condition of the tracks, which could cost up to \$200 million to fix, and the relatively low settlement densities along the corridor.

Scheduling decisions for the Arthur Kill Lift Bridge, which was rehabilitated in 1998 to ready the route for freight service, are currently being made. With the dispute over land in Union County now settled, final design and construction can go forward on that section of track.

Officials expect economic development to increase along routes served by freight rail.

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



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Calendar

Oct. 3, noon-2pm Transportation Research Forum Brown Bag Technical Seminar, "Emergency Evacuation from Transit Stations." Herbert T. Landow, Transit Consultant. 212-435-4226 or pgessner@panynj.gov

Oct. 3, 4:15-6:15pm or 6:45-8:45 pm L.I. Sound Waterborne Transportation Plan Community Planning Workshop. Glen Cove Ferry Terminal. crya@hshassoc.com, 917-339-0488

Oct. 3, 6:30pm Save The G meeting. Location TBA. 718-383-7489 or teresatoro@yahoo.com

Oct. 10, 4:15-6:15pm or 6:45-8:45 pm [new date] L.I. Sound Waterborne Transportation Plan Community Planning Workshop. Murphy Rd. Jr. High School, Oxhead Road, Stony Brook. crya@hshassoc.com, 917-339-0488.

Oct. 10, 11:45 am "Port Security: One Year Later," Transportation Research Forum meeting, Richard M. Larrabee, Port Authority. 212-435-4226 or pgessner@panynj.gov

Oct. 10, Noon-8pm Bruckner-Sheridan Interchange open house. NY State DOT. 198 East 161st St., Bronx. 212-799- 8803 or www.dot.state.ny.us/reg/r11/bese/

Oct. 15, 12-8pm Bruckner-Sheridan Interchange open house. NY State DOT. 940 Farrison Avenue, Bronx. 212-799- 8803 or www.dot.state.ny.us/reg/r11/bese/

Oct. 18, 8:30- 4:30pm 2002 Environmental Congress. "What's Ailing Us? The Sprawl-Health Connection." Rutgers University, Piscataway. 609-278-5088 or www.anjec.org

Oct. 25, 8:30am-2pm 3rd Annual Tri-State Transit Symposium. NYU Wagner School and others. Keynote speaker: MTA executive director Katherine Lapp. Others include NJ Transit's George Warrington, USDOT's Emil Frankel.

Nov. 20, Cool New York – A Global Warming Summit, Environmental Advocates of NY, National Council of Churches of Christ. 518-462-5526 ext. 240 or cvanderlan@eany.org

more calendar entries at www.tstc.org