

# Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

Number 388

October 21, 2002

## NEWS

### Fare Hike Watch



During the Oct. 13 gubernatorial debate, candidates were asked if they would guarantee to not raise transit fares, and if they had plans to keep fares stable.

**Governor George Pataki** would not rule out a fare hike, focusing primarily on MTA's recent record of "improving service and reducing cost." He said fares could be kept stable by cutting costs and attracting more riders to increase revenue. But neither of these are likely to help close MTA deficits in the short or medium terms (MTR #387).

**H. Carl McCall** criticized the Pataki administration for not releasing detailed information about MTA capital and operating budgets, which McCall says he needs to make an informed statement. McCall said he does not want to raise fares, but when asked how a hike would be avoided said, "I'm not sure exactly how we can do it, but we have to find a way to do it. We have to find a way to do it without finding some other new revenue stream or some other new tax."

**Tom Golisano** changed the subject, saying that taxes and state spending should be limited. "The last thing I would like to see happen is our taxes raised and that includes commuter taxes and all other tolls and penalties for mobility," he said. When again asked, Golisano said he could not promise not to hike fares.

The *Daily News* argued, in a Sunday editorial, that the MTA should address the inequity in fares and funding between suburban trains and city subways and buses. The *News* urged the state to give more transit aid to city operations, and to dedicate more of the revenue from bridge and tunnel tolls (most of which is paid by city residents) to city transit. If a fare hike does go forward, the paper wrote, the MTA must improve and expand bus and subway service.

**Gene Russianoff** of the Straphangers Campaign, made a case against a fare hike in a *News* op-ed last Tuesday. Russianoff urged state officials and Governor Pataki to allow a public discussion about the hike by providing specific budget figures. He proposed several alternatives to an increase: ending inequities in state transit funding and creating new

### City Hall Active on East River Tolls

The *Daily News* reported over the weekend that City Hall was "**actively considering**" East River bridge tolls. The report cited city government sources.

Advocates for East River bridge tolls have estimated that if the issue had life, it would become more prominently discussed after this fall's election.

It's unclear whether city government has done much detailed analysis yet of toll policy options and implementation issues. Even with minimal political delays, it could take **up to two years to put tolls in place**.

Television news coverage that followed the *News* report followed predictable and painfully obvious patterns. Reporters asked drivers whether they wanted to pay new tolls, or interviewed Brooklyn Borough President Markowitz, a toll foe.

They generally failed to discuss potential congestion relief benefits of tolls, that very few "working stiffs" car commute into Manhattan or the July survey that showed **New Yorkers in every borough supporting new bridge tolls** over higher taxes or fares (MTR #375).

### Southwestern Connecticut Among Nation's Worst Zones for Sprawl

An exhaustively researched study released last week by Smart Growth America found that the statistical area containing Danbury, Stamford, Norwalk and Bridgeport is the **7th most sprawling** in the country.

The paper defines sprawl as the process in which the spread of development across the landscape far outpaces population growth. The process creates four distinct features: a widely dispersed population; rigid separation of homes, shops and workplaces; a road network featuring huge blocks and poor access; and a lack of well-defined, thriving activity centers.

Smart Growth America's researchers applied the four factors to create a sprawl index for 83 statistical metropolitan areas (as delineated by the U.S. Census Department).

While southwestern Connecticut is above the average for mixed land uses, it is below average for centeredness and density, and significantly off the mark for street connectivity. The area's overall rating takes account of its performance relative to similar-sized areas, and its location within a larger metropolitan area. Southwestern Connecticut's **dis-**

**position to sprawl despite its proximity to New York** was significant in landing it in the bottom 10.

**Traffic congestion** in Fairfield County and along the I-95 coastal corridor is locally recognized as a huge problem. Yet attempts to address it have focused on relatively minor improvements to New Haven Line rail service and ill-considered schemes to widen I-95. Few parties, including the Transportation Strategy Board, have looked to the **root causes of mounting congestion** in an area which is not significantly adding population. Until they do, the fight against traffic will be a losing proposition.

### Further Thoughts on MTA Reorganization

Some say the creation of a construction unit for system expansion project will augur well for momentum within the MTA to **build projects like the LIRR-Grand Central connection** and perhaps the **Second Avenue subway**. Others caution that divorcing construction from planning and operations can lead to **problems such as new projects bleeding resources** from ongoing repair and insufficient attention paid to the impact of new construction.

The Stamford *Advocate* complained last week that the MTA leadership had blindsided Connecticut with its reorganization announcement. ConnDOT manages the New Haven line jointly with Metro-North. The MTA plan will merge Metro-North and the Long Island Railroad into a large MTA Railroads agency. Connecticut officials seemed to be unaware of how the MTA intended to use the purported administrative savings the reorganization will create. The *Advocate* was concerned that problems it perceives at the Long Island Railroad may infect New Haven Line operations. **Governor Rowland** followed up last week with a letter to Governor Pataki, asking that Connecticut transportation officials be **included in further discussion of commuter rail merger**. The MTA said it is organizing committees to organize the merger and that CT officials are likely to be included.

Remarks by **Governor Pataki** during last week's NY State gubernatorial debate may shed light on the timing and substance of the announcement. In response to a question about a potential transit fare increase, the governor **said the reorganization is one of the concrete steps he was taking to stave off a hike**. Pataki avoided pledging not to raise fares. Instead, he cited the reorganization as a step that would "allow us to continue to look to have the lowest possible fares and the best possible service."

The Tri-State Transportation Campaign web site:

[www.tstc.org](http://www.tstc.org)

### PA Smart Card Project Underway

Last week, newspapers in the region ran a notice from the Port Authority seeking consultants to work on development of "**smart card**" transit fare collection.

The Port Authority has discussed **PATH and NYC Transit fare integration** in the context of adopting smart cards — magnetic fare cards that more closely resemble E-ZPass than MetroCard. They are read as they pass through entry points, but do not have to be physically swiped through a machine.

In December, the Port Authority board authorized \$51 million for a new PATH fare system that would use smart cards and be **compatible with MetroCard**. New PATH turnstiles will have MetroCard swipe readers as well scanners for smart cards, which can be read through a wallet.

The PA also hoped that its smart card would be **adaptable to other regional rail and bus systems**. Last week's request-for-proposals notice mentioned a "regional smart card system in the New York, New Jersey, Connecticut and Pennsylvania region."

While the RFP notice likely indicates progress on the system, it is still **unclear when the PATH fare system will be up and running**, and where smart card applications in the region go from there.

### Post Dismantles Downtown Rail Plans

*NY Post* columnist Steve Cuzzo went after lower Manhattan commuter rail advocates last Thursday, blasting "**extravagant**" proposals that would "**benefit a tiny handful of commuters**." Cuzzo said commuter rail riders made up a very low percentage of total lower Manhattan employment. While that may help make downtown commuter rail backers' case — they contend downtown is too hard to get to from the suburbs — he also said plenty of suburban rail commuters destined for Midtown switch from commuter rail to subways.

Cuzzo also looked at the time frames and costs for current MTA expansion projects like the LIRR-Grand Central connection, arguing that these factors put any plan to link the NY commuter railroads with lower Manhattan **far outside the time-frame** of any rebuilding plan that needs to be implemented relatively quickly. The LIRR-Grand Central connection, for instance, is not likely to be done before 2011.

In a perfect transit world, lower Manhattan would have a commuter rail station. Critics are concerned mainly about its **budgetary competition with other needed projects** that will serve much bigger markets, and with the prospect that its proponents are willing to **disrupt the subway network** in order to achieve it. Both the LIRR-Grand Central connection and the Second Ave. Subway remain in very early stages.

Should either of these projects be delayed so a relative handful can reach downtown without switching to the subway?

The *Daily News* jumped on the downtown rail bandwagon last week, arguing that the downtown commuter rail projects should be top priority for the \$4.5 billion in federal funding in hand for transit rebuilding. The *News*' recommended route for getting Metro-North downtown – running over the Hell Gate Bridge to freight tracks through Brooklyn and Queens and thence to an Atlantic Ave. LIRR route to Lower Manhattan — sounds like it would take longer than switching to the subway at Grand Central.

Cuozzo's *Post* column unfortunately also took a swipe at the cost and construction impacts of a

### Ferry Riders Demand More Service

Not deterred by cold, rainy weather, about 40 Staten Island Ferry riders rallied outside Borough Hall Wednesday night to demand **more frequent overnight service**. The rally, organized by the Ferry Riders Committee, took place before a New York City Council Transportation Committee hearing on a bill to expand service.

Members of the Transportation Committee heard testimony from many of the more than 100 ferry riders and workers who attended the hearing. The bill, sponsored by Michael McMahon, would increase overnight service from once an hour to every thirty minutes. However, it **does not provide extra funding** to pay for the expansion.

The bill under consideration does not mention privatization of overnight ferry service, but the topic was prevalent at the hearing, according to the *Staten Island Advance*. The city Dept. of Transportation indicated in July that it wanted to **contract out the overnight service** by January (*MTR #373*).

The City Council would only have jurisdiction over the issue of privatization if it were able to successfully label the new service a "franchise." If not, City DOT has authority. A DOT representative read a prepared statement during the hearing, highlighting agency efforts to build two new terminals, provide more ferry boats, and improve roadways. She said that DOT does not have the **\$3 million required to increase overnight service**. The representative had been instructed not to answer questions.

Critics of privatization argue that handing over service to a private operator would compromise safety, reduce capacity on boats and lessen accountability to the public (*MTR #379*). Although the hearing provided a public forum for riders to ask for better service, a bill mandating expansion is unlikely to pass the full council or receive support from Mayor Bloomberg.

downtown hub linking PATH and subways. A *Post* editorial the same day went the whole distance and argued that **no money should be spent** to improve any aspect of lower Manhattan transit. But that argument is moot, since billions in federal aid are already in hand to construct a downtown subway-PATH hub and related projects.

### Higher Fines Could Help HOV Lanes

Although New York City and State transportation officials increased the passenger requirement on the Gowanus Expressway HOV lane to three-per-car early this year, the roadway still likely suffers from reduced operating speeds thanks to one- and two-passenger vehicles violating the rule.

The NY State DOT estimated that as many as 15% of cars using the Gowanus HOV lane in 1998 were solo drivers (*MTR #234*).

In August, several months after the 3+ rule was implemented, express bus drivers who use the Gowanus told the *Staten Island Advance* they see **hundreds of single-occupant cars** flooding the lane each morning. In the first four months after the change to HOV-3, the NYPD Highway Patrol only issued 400 tickets for HOV violators (*MTR #379*).

Research by the Tri-State Campaign suggests that New York's fines for violating HOV lanes is low compared to those in other cities.

The fine for under-occupied vehicles using the Gowanus HOV lane is \$70, a total comprised of a \$40 fine and a \$30 tax.

Some other cities and states charge similar violators **up to seven times more**. In Georgia, the fine starts at \$75 but can increase to \$150, depending on the number of previous violations the driver has had. Virginia also has a progressive fine, going from an initial \$50, to \$100, \$250, and **up to \$500**.

Other cities have high flat fines. Dallas, for example, charges \$200 each time a driver violates the HOV lane laws. HOV violation fines throughout California are \$271.

Transportation managers suggested that high fines deter inappropriate vehicles from using special lanes. A spokesman for the Los Angeles County MTA, for instance, told the Campaign that drivers take the high California fines very seriously.

To our knowledge, no official study of HOV violation rates in NYC or measures to deter such behavior is available from the city or state DOT.

In addition to the Gowanus HOV-3 lane, HOV or similar lanes in NYC include those on the Queensboro Bridge and on the Long Island Expressway approach to the Queens-Midtown Tunnel. Rush hour HOV-2 rules are in effect for all lanes on the Williamsburg, Manhattan and Brooklyn Bridges.

## More Evidence of Red Light Running Epidemic

*Advance* reporters recently documented **out-of-control red light running** across **Staten Island**. They surveyed five intersections over four days, counting 3,553 total red light violations. 2,063 were drivers making illegal right turns on red, while the remaining 1,490 simply blew straight through a red light. They found that **police issued only 362 tickets** in the borough **for red light running in June**.

An *Advance* editorial expressed astonishment at the large number of drivers willing to risk their own lives, as well as those of others around them.

But the paper's findings are consistent with an intersection survey conducted in 2001 by then-city Comptroller Alan Hevesi's office. The study of intersections across the city extrapolated from its observations to estimate that New York City motorists violate red lights **more than 1 million times** from 7am-7pm on a weekday (*MTR* 319).

Right-of-Way's *Killed by Automobile* analysis of NYC traffic fatalities from 1994-1997 found that vehicles driving through red lights or stop signs was the **third greatest cause of pedestrian and cyclist death** (*MTR* #212)

At times, Mayor Giuliani decried lawlessness on the streets, but enforcement blitzes proved ephemeral. Mayor Bloomberg, understandably preoccupied with rebuilding and fiscal issues, has said little about it.

But the problem remains. Without leadership willing to identify it as a priority, civility and safety on the street will continue to degrade. As a society, we mostly wink at automobile violations. As a result, the informal bar defining acceptable behavior at the wheel keeps getting lower. New Yorkers will continue to drive like animals until police are instructed to consistently enforce the letter of the law.

Employment Opportunities at the  
Tri-State Transportation Campaign

- Legislative Agent, Trenton, NJ
- Northern New Jersey Advocate

Details at [www.tstc.org](http://www.tstc.org)

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



*Mobilizing the Region*

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## CALENDAR

**October 22, 6-8pm** Auto-Free NY meeting, "Who Killed NYC's Once Extensive Streetcar Network?" Edson Tennyson P.E., retired transit executive. 212-475-3394 or [www.auto-free.org](http://www.auto-free.org)

**October 23, 6-9pm** ASHE Southern NJ Chapter meeting, NJDOT Route 1/130/171 Interchange Project. 856-663-5550 (x2023) or [jm-pavlik@urbanengineers.com](mailto:jm-pavlik@urbanengineers.com) \$\$

**October 24, noon** New York City Transit Riders Council meeting. 347 Madison Avenue, 5th Floor. [www.pcac.org](http://www.pcac.org) or 212-878-7087

**October 24, 7-9pm** SEEDS Community Stakeholders Committee Meeting. Flanders-Riverside Community Center 225 Flanders Road, Riverhead. 516-265-0735 or [www.seedsproject.com](http://www.seedsproject.com)

**October 24, 7:30pm** Staten Island Transportation, Today and Tomorrow: Forum and Speak-Out. Wagner College, Spiro 2. 718-605-2658 or [statenisgreens@aol.com](mailto:statenisgreens@aol.com)

**October 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. 212-998-7544 or [/www.nyu.edu/wagner/rudin-center/](http://www.nyu.edu/wagner/rudin-center/) \$\$

**November 1-2** Planning into Practice: A conference for Community-Based Groups, Professionals and Institutions. Hunter College 425 E. 25th St. at 1st Ave. 212-750-3972 or [planning@mas.org](mailto:planning@mas.org) \$\$

**November 11, 1-2** Transportation Strategy Board meeting. Omni Hotel at Yale, New Haven. 860-594-2073 or [www.opm.state.ct.us/](http://www.opm.state.ct.us/)

**November 14, 5:30pm** Voorhees Transportation Center, "The Implications of Back to Basics," George D. Warrington, Director, NJ TRANSIT. 33 Livingston Ave., New Brunswick. [cdanku@rci.rutgers.edu](mailto:cdanku@rci.rutgers.edu) or 732-932-6812 \$\$

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