

# Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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## NEWS

### Fare Hike Watch



• The **MTA Finance Committee** met last Thursday, presenting revenue and spending trends that indicate NYC Transit's finances may not be as bad as warnings of a fare increase assume. The \$992 million collected as of September in state tax revenue earmarked for the agency is just slightly below last year's level. Revenue from subway and bus riders is up nearly \$40 million over the projected budget, and spending was down over \$30 million as of August.

As a result, NYC Transit was \$66.3 million ahead of its budget in August. At the meeting, a budget official said the trends could put the agency's finances "on sound footing next year."

• **MTA spokesman** Tom Kelly, however, said the agency will still face a \$663 million budget shortfall next year, stating, "early numbers are often wrong."

The recent figures, which compare actual vs. projected finances from the current year's budget, do not necessarily rule out a fare hike. But they may call into question projected shortfall estimates and highlight the need for a more informed public discussion about fares and other transit revenues. Such a discussion should be backed by a full briefing on NYC Transit's and the MTA's financial condition.

• The **New York City Council** agrees, and unanimously passed a resolution last Wednesday urging Governor Pataki to order the MTA to release "financial documents and analyses that might indicate whether a fare increase is necessary or justified."

The city council has no authority over MTA operations or policy, however, so the move was largely symbolic. "This resolution, I believe, represents the will of New Yorkers," transportation committee chair John Liu, who introduced the resolution, told *Newsday*. "It sends a clear signal to the MTA that we want accountability."

### Congestion and Sprawl: Whose Problem to Solve?

NJ Governor James McGreevey took a big risk when he invited Maryland Governor Parris Glendening to be the lunch speaker at McGreevey's smart growth summit last week. The public and press would compare McGreevey's actions with the anti-sprawl programs that Glendening has put in place.

Most of McGreevey's rhetoric was excellent. His mantra is that state government will "**stop subsidizing sprawl.**" The summit gathered New Jersey's political, editorial, transportation, environmental and development industry leaders met to figure out how to accommodate the projected 900,000 people expected to settle in the Garden State by 2020 without consuming every acre of open space and farmland, and every square inch of space on the roads.

After describing sprawl's deleterious effects, including economic impacts of congestion, McGreevey noted that 40% of residential building permits issued in the last five years were **not in targeted growth areas** under the State Plan, adding, "[t]he State can't be part of the solution if it's part of the problem."

"We are committed to taking a fix it first approach to the State's transportation infrastructure. In the past ten years, New Jersey spent an average of 20% of its transportation capital budget on new roads. This year, we have driven that number **down to only 4%**. Our efforts have been focused on sensible, targeted investments that improve quality of life, like clearing up the bottlenecks that congest our roads."

Of course, adding lane capacity to "clear up" bottlenecks rarely works over time, and often induces or diverts so many other trips that the congestion relief quickly disappears, leading to another round of widenings. There isn't much middle ground when it comes to new highway capacity. As Commissioner Fox noted, "We must **break the boom and bust cycle of growth and congestion** before it consumes our budget and way of life." Even the smaller capacity projects cost a lot.

McGreevey promised "to reform our highway access policy to control development that spills onto our highways." Noting that congestion follows, he said, "DOT is asked to come in and repair damage with more lanes and more highways. The impact on our

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road system needs to be considered before the development is approved in the first place.”

Transportation reformers have begun urging state

### **Bergen Arches Concept Study Complete: Public Adamantly Opposes Roadway Option**

Jersey City civic leaders unanimously condemned any notion of developing a roadway in the Bergen Arches rail trench at a public meeting last Wednesday night.

The Bergen Arches is an abandoned railroad trench that runs through the heart of Jersey City and tunnels through the Palisades toward Secaucus. The Bergen Arches it is near several major roadways, the Hudson-Bergen Light Rail system, NJ Transit and PATH lines and various freight rail lines and yards. The Wednesday meeting represented the end of the current phase of study. It was launched as a moderate-neutral transportation investigation after protests against the highway-only discussion that began among city and NJ DOT officials in the late 1990s.

Former mayor Brett Schundler had championed a Bergen Arches highway as a way **to bring more cars** to the rapidly developing Jersey City waterfront, but civic activists have resisted, saying the dense and rapidly developing city should emphasize transit in any development of transportation capacity.

Jersey City mayor Glenn Cunningham said during his election campaign in 2001 he favors light rail development in the right-of-way.

Wednesday’s presentation was the final act for the concept study. It is now up to Jersey City and the NJTPA to decide whether to pursue development.

The study ranked a “mixed” option of HOV lanes and general roadway lanes in the trench as the top option, though **light rail** between the Jersey City waterfront, the Secaucus Transfer and the Meadowlands sports complex also ranked highly.

Jersey City citizens were incensed that “stakeholder interest” was given lower consideration than other issues in the ranking. They attacked any notion of using the corridor as a roadway and said the city was **already overrun by cars**. Many expressed a distrust of transportation agencies and the process by which the Bergen Arches is being studied and debated. Given the over tenor of the meeting, and the sometimes withering rhetoric directed against them, members of the DOT, TPA and consultant team seemed relieved that the study had drawn to a close.

The Tri-State Campaign and the Committee for Better Transit agreed that highway options would bring more traffic **without yielding sustainable congestion relief**. The groups said that **rail freight** options for the corridor should be given another look given anticipated growth at New Jersey ports, the study findings notwithstanding.

DOTs to stop taking full ownership of congestion and challenge municipalities to change gridlock-inducing development plans. The McGreevey administration appears to have taken a step in that direction.

Talk on mass transit was more disappointing. McGreevey and Fox mainly took credit for decisions made in the past, and lauded “**transit villages**” without offering anything concrete. Smart growth for transit seemed to amount primarily to building parking at train stations.

In subsequent remarks, Commissioner Fox said it would be “irresponsible” not to ease congestion, but identified congestion’s cause as towns’ pursuit of tax revenue from big box stores and other developments.

Again pinning high hopes on **driveway permit regulatory reform**, Fox said, “There is no weaker link in our regulatory armor than the current statutory policy on highway access [permits]. Effectively, once a community approves a project, so long as the ...permit conforms to safety standards, DOT is forced to grant the permit – regardless of its impact on sprawl. If we are unable to change this policy, we will continue to fight sprawl with one hand tied behind our back. We will always be waging a rear-guard action.”

Fox claimed he would make tough decisions. His specific pledges were:

- To maintain the 4% level spending for new roads;
- Give top priority to repair work on existing roads and bridges;
- Projects that make transit a practical, convenient option will get a higher priority;
- Ten worst congestion and safety hot spots will be remedied;
- Send the Hillsborough Bypass of Rt. 206 back to the drawing board for redesign without interchanges (which he called “fertilizers for sprawl”).

Governor Glendening’s speech was riveting, including specific descriptions of fiscal, zoning, planning, redevelopment and regulatory tools Maryland created to **focus development into “priority funding areas.”** Of course, Glendening stopped five highway bypasses in his initial thrust to implement the priority funding area law. Hence, the risk of comparison.

### **Focus on East River Bridge Tolls Continues**

Public debate spurred by the Bloomberg administration’s talk of putting tolls on East River Bridges continued through last week. City Hall seems prepared to stick to its position even after sparking peculiar **pre-election media attention** of a potentially hot issue. Reporters’ subsequent questions forced Governor Pataki into a “no” stance on tolls, but Mayor Bloomberg apparently does not accept

that as the final word. Still, the Mayor does not seem willing to go it alone. Despite a legal opinion commissioned by Transportation Alternatives concluding that the city could place toll city-owned roadways without Albany's approval, the mayor told the *Daily News* that his administration would seek the state legislature's approval. The *Daily News* disagreed, and today urged the city to forge ahead on tolls itself. "While there are no tolls now, the taxpaying public must realize that the four bridges aren't really free. They eat up a fortune in maintenance costs," the paper wrote. *Newsday* had earlier chided the Governor for his position against tolls, noting that they would reduce traffic congestion and encourage transit use as well as raise revenue.

Earlier in the week, however, the city had discussed **selling or leasing the bridges to the MTA**, which

### Groups Urge City to Continue Rail Freight Effort

Last week, a group of 21 New York City-based community and transportation groups sent a letter to Mayor Bloomberg that emphasized the benefits of a **cross-harbor rail freight tunnel** and the many problems caused by over-reliance on trucks. The letter followed reports that the mayor considers the freight project a "**back burner**" issue (*MTR* #379).

The letter summarized the need for a direct rail link across the Hudson, citing truck impacts and worsening traffic congestion. It compared new projects that have improved rail freight in the Los Angeles and Chicago areas to **New York's isolation** from the U.S. rail network.

Although little has been heard about the project in recent months, a brief report in *Crain's NY Business* last week indicated that the city is committed to finishing the project's EIS process. *Crain's* said Deputy Mayor Daniel Doctoroff has asked Congress for \$5 million needed to complete the EIS.

*Crain's* also reported that estimated costs for the project have **ballooned** to more than \$7 billion, a huge increase over earlier estimates, which were in the \$2 billion neighborhood. However, the origin of the higher figure is not clear. The article only cited "officials" and the NYC Economic Development Council, which has been developing the project, has not revised its cost estimates.

At a transportation conference convened by NYU's Wagner School last week (see article at right), Congressman Jerrold Nadler said construction of the rail freight tunnel should be the city's most important priority during **next year's federal transportation authorization**. Nadler urged a distinction between "nice" and "essential" projects, and argued forcefully that the freight tunnel is in the latter category.

collects tolls at most other major river crossings.

Putting the bridges under MTA control would resolve some of the policy issues East River toll revenue would raise. Would the money be used to improve transportation, and if so, how? MTA toll revenue maintains the bridges and tunnels, with the surplus going to NYC Transit and the MTA commuter railroads. A new deal would likely be struck over East River revenue, including lease payments to the city. But it would imply that a good portion of surplus revenues would be **devoted to mass transit**.

Last week's other theme was high-tech toll collection. A front-page *NY Times* story highlighted technological advances that may make bridge tolls an easier sell than in previous times. Though the piece focused on high falutin examples like the all-electronic E-407 route outside of Toronto, non-stop E-Z Pass applications are already in use in this region — for instance at the NJ Turnpike's exit 6. The mayor turned to the topic during his Friday radio show, expressing enthusiasm for non-stop tolling and proposing sale of **anonymous toll cards** to anyone unhappy about the privacy implications of an E-ZPass account.

### Conference Assembles Transit Chiefs

The Rudin Transportation Center of NYU's Wagner School convened its third annual Tri-State Transit Conference on Friday. It featured top mass transit managers from the region, as well as overseers of large transit projects from Europe and Asia. The following are brief reports on comments by New York and New Jersey officials:

MTA executive director **Katherine Lapp** said the MTA was considering congestion pricing on its bridges and tunnels, but had not come to a conclusion about whether to do it.

She stated that the costs of LIRR access to lower Manhattan would be over and above the \$4.5 billion in federal aid available for lower Manhattan mass transit, and said the MTA was heavily invested in building the Second Avenue subway.

Lapp also said the merger of Long Island Bus and NYC Transit's bus division, as recently proposed in the MTA's restructuring plan, should improve service between Nassau County and NYC, and would not dilute Long Island Bus' upbeat agency culture.

Metro-North president **Peter Cannito** said the railroad will have record ridership this year, despite the anemic economy, due to gains in off-peak ridership.

He also said that if full funding for a possible Tappan Bridge replacement and Rockland-Westchester transit line is not available, the agencies involved could approach the project in stages. That could mean a new, wider bridge with only a transit

component left as a promise for a vaguely defined future. Many Hudson Valley civic and elected leaders have said that prospect is unacceptable.

New Jersey Transit's **Rich Roberts** said New Jersey was developing a new state transportation master plan to inform discussions about future transit and highway funding. He said Transit was interested in developing bus rapid transit projects, and that it was presently working on a bus prioritization plan near Newark Penn Station.

### **Route 92 Foe Paints Picture of Sprawl**

In an Oct. 18 letter to the *Courier News*, Kingston resident Steve Masticola highlighted the link between smart growth and transportation policy in light of Governor McGreevey's recent summit on sprawl. The letter challenged the Turnpike Authority's plan to build **Route 92** through central New Jersey and urged Governor James McGreevey to "get the state's road building machine under control."

Route 92 is proposed 6.7-mile highway that would run through Middlesex County, extending from New Jersey Turnpike Interchange 8A to Route 1 in South Brunswick. Its estimated cost is \$350 million.

The proposed road encountered opposition several years ago, when it was first announced (*MTR* #170). Last spring, a group of officials from several towns that would be affected by the highway organized to voice their opposition to the highway (*MTR* #359). The project's environmental impact statement was expected to be complete last spring, but its release has been delayed until this winter.

"The Turnpike Authority's Route 92 is a prime example of road building run amok," Masticola's letter read. "Every commuter on Route 1, everyone living in a dozen historical communities and every taxpayer in the state would suffer from Route 92."

#### 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



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## CALENDAR

**November 1, 9:30am-noon** Transportation Strategy Board Commercial Real Estate Panel. Rensselaer Poly Tech/Room 330, 275 Windsor Street, Hartford. 860-594-2073 or [Robert.Hammersley@po.state.ct.us](mailto:Robert.Hammersley@po.state.ct.us)

**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 2, 11:30am-3pm** Community Visioning Workshop for the Cony Island/Gravesend Sustainable Dev. Transportation Study. NY Aquarium. 212-442-7909 or [www.nymtc.org](http://www.nymtc.org)

**November 5, 8am-1pm** CT Transportation Strategy Board meeting. Legislative Office Building. 860-594-2073, [www.opm.state.ct.us](http://www.opm.state.ct.us)

**November 7, 9:15am** 18th Annual Construction Forecast Seminar. Marriott Conference Center, 1 West Lafayette Street, Trenton. 732-225-1180 \$\$

**November 2, 11:30am-3pm** Community Visioning Workshop for the Cony Island/Gravesend Sustainable Development Transportation Study. Lafayette High School. 212-442-7909 or [www.nymtc.org](http://www.nymtc.org)

**November 7, 11:45am** Transportation Research Forum, "TEA-21 Reauthorization: Twelve Months and Counting" Mortimer L. Downey III, Principal Consultant, PB Consult. 100 Washington Street at Rector Street. 212-435-4226 or [pguessner@panynj.gov](mailto:pguessner@panynj.gov) \$\$

**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** "The Implications of Back to Basics," George D. Warrington, NJ TRANSIT. Special Events Forum, Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy, 33 Livingston Ave., New Brunswick. 732-932-6812 x700 or [cdanku@rci.rutgers.edu](mailto:cdanku@rci.rutgers.edu) \$\$

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