

Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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NEWS

Fare Hike Watch



• The MTA raised the specter of transit service reductions Nov. 1 when branch bosses were instructed to cut projected budgets 5% by Wednesday. Agency heads were also told several months ago to cut budgets by an undisclosed amount, but service cuts were not allowed. The last time big MTA service cuts took place was 1995 — also the last year MTA raised transit fares.

• Even with budget cuts, **MTA officials** told reporters they do not expect to close an estimated \$663 million shortfall. The 5% reduction will total \$200 million and will be implemented in 2003-2004.

• MTA spokesman **Tom Kelly** told the *NY Post* that “a fare hike is the last resort.” He said other revenue or increased state or city subsidies could help avert a fare hike. Mayor Bloomberg, however, has indicated that the city is exploring going the other way and reducing its contribution to the MTA (*MTR* #375).

• **Governor George Pataki**, who controls the MTA, is sticking to pre-election statements on the possibility of a fare hike. Asked about the issue by the *Daily News*, the Governor replied, “We’re doing our best to avoid that.” Governor Pataki says fare hikes could be avoided if ridership increases and agency restructuring produces savings. However, neither of these is likely to occur in the short term.

• **MTA operating agencies**, including NYC Transit, Metro-North and Long Island Railroad are likely to report 2003 budgets at the Nov. 21 board meeting.

• **Dave Katzman**, spokesman for Transport Workers Union Local 100, criticized the MTA for holding off news of possible service cuts until days after the gubernatorial election. “The timing is so obvious as to be embarrassing,” he told the *News*.

• Critics of service cuts, including the **Straphangers Campaign**, have noted that subway and bus ridership is at near-record levels, despite the weakened economy. “In the past, service cuts have meant dirtier subways, longer lines at [token] booths and longer waits for trains,” Gene Russianoff, the Straphangers Staff Attorney, told press. “Riders . . . don't like fare hikes, period, but they really resent being asked to pay more for less.”

Free Flow Tolling Catches On

The NY State Thruway Authority announced last week it would reconfigure its **Tappan Zee Bridge** toll plaza to allow E-ZPass holders to travel through at **20 mph**. At present, E-ZPass readers are installed in narrow, old-style toll lanes that force drivers to slow to 5 mph. The E-ZPass-only lanes will not run through booths, but will be ordinary through lanes with **electronic toll readers** installed overhead.

The Thruway estimates that the higher-speed lanes will handle 1,500 cars per hour, versus 950 for its current E-ZPass lanes.

The work has been inserted into the big project to realign the Thruway/Cross-Westchester Expressway interchange east of the bridge. “The ultimate aim is to have a boothless highway as much as possible,” Thruway spokesperson Terry O’Brien told reporters.

The Thruway’s announcement comes on the heels of NJ Governor James McGreevey’s commitment to develop high-speed toll collection on the **Garden State Parkway and NJ Turnpike** (*MTR* #390). The Port Authority is also developing applications for the George Washington Bridge and the NJ-Staten Island Outerbridge Crossing.

Non-stop toll collection would be critical to the implementation of tolls on **New York City’s East River bridges**. The suddenly accelerating march of non-stop tolling in the metro region may add momentum to East River tolls, backed by Mayor Bloomberg.

At some point, it is also likely to raise questions about traffic policy at MTA bridges and tunnels. The MTA still uses gates in its E-ZPass lanes, requiring drivers to come to a full stop.

In response to reporters’ questions about the future of the Tappan Zee Bridge prior to the election, the Pataki administration demurred and indicated that the Metro-North/Thruway study was still underway.

Region’s Transportation Needs Face Hard Road Through Republican Senate

Last week’s election results change the outlook for metropolitan transportation primarily through the Republican ascension in the U.S. Senate. The 108th Congress will be seated nine months before the current **federal transportation funding law** – TEA-21 – expires. Thus, a major job for Congress in 2003 will

be crafting a new transportation bill. At stake is billions in federal transportation assistance.

The region has been counting not only on important federal formula funds for highways and transit, but also on special funding to advance huge undertakings like the **Second Avenue subway** and a second New Jersey-Manhattan **commuter rail tunnel**.

Getting all the region needs from the federal government was looking tough enough before the election. Indeed, at the Rudin Center/Wagner School transit conference in Manhattan two weeks ago (*MTR* #389), U.S. DOT assistant secretary Emil Frankel told the audience **not to expect a transportation funding increase** anywhere near that seen (in the neighborhood of 40%) when TEA-21 succeeded ISTEA in 1998. The metropolitan region's delegation has lost considerable seniority on key Senate committees since 1998, and northeastern House delegations continue to erode under the weight of Sunbelt population growth. When TEA-21 was crafted, the Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs Committee, which drafts mass transit legislation for the Senate, was headed by New York's Al D'Amato.

With the Bush administration now likely emboldened to pursue its tax cut agenda, the federal deficit and **budget pressure on non-military programs** is almost certain to grow. Those poised to take important Senate committee leadership posts beginning in January are unlikely to have our region's best interests at heart. Oklahoma's **James Inhofe** is set to chair the Environment and Public Works Committee, which will write the bulk of the "TEA-3" bill. Inhofe is far to the right, known for his vitriol and uncompromising positions and has reportedly compared the Environmental Protection Agency to the Gestapo.

Alabama's **Richard Shelby** is said to be ready to lead the Banking Committee. In 1999, less than a year after 18 months of national debate on TEA-21's apportionment formulas concluded, Shelby introduced legislation to change mass transit allocations. Shelby's provision, inserted into an appropriation bill, would have **stripped \$320 million annually from New York and California** and distributed it evenly among the other 48 states (*MTR* #222). NY and CA account for over 50% of U.S. transit users, but receive about 30% of federal transit funding under TEA-21. Senators Schumer and Moynihan, with their California colleagues, had to threaten to filibuster the bill to defeat Shelby's move.

Highway groups are also likely to press their "**environmental streamlining**" agenda more strongly than ever as they sense increased momentum behind a broad anti-environmental agenda in Washington.

Still, the **region's Senators are heavily repre-**

sented on the committees that will draft TEA-3. Senators Clinton, Corzine and Lieberman now sit on Environment and Public Works. Democrats will lose a seat on the panel, and some other shuffling may occur. Senator Lautenberg is said to be interested in a transportation post, but it's unclear that two NJ Democrats will be represented on EPW. Senators Schumer, Dodd and Corzine sit on the Banking Committee, but there too, Democrats will lose a seat.

Olympic Transport Plan Counts on Big Assumptions and Projects

As New York City reaches to host the Olympics in 2012, its transportation concept bears heavy scrutiny and public input before any final decision in 2005. Can the city move 16,000 athletes and other participants and tens of thousands of spectators each day for two weeks without severely disrupting the week-day commerce, life and commutes of workers and residents? If so, can it be done without distorting long-term development and infrastructure priorities?

The good news from an "operations" point of view is that NYC claims it will host the most compact games in recent history. 29 of the 40 events will be held in the five boroughs. Detail about access is not satisfying, however. NYC does not intend to provide for motorists with more parking beyond park-n-rides along major rail lines. It says drive-up events will be limited to venues that already have mammoth parking supplies, like Giants Stadium and Nassau Coliseum.

But **strategies for reducing traffic look weak**. Employers will be told to stagger hours, promote carpooling, encourage telecommuting and ask employees to take vacations. Deliveries will be time-restricted. If these things are possible, perhaps some of them should be implemented now. But a more workable plan would probably resemble the post-September 11 Manhattan **HOV rule** (nominally still in force downtown) and be in force over a wider area. Atlanta imposed SOV prohibitions during its 1996 games. Still, some increase in car traffic seems inevitable as not every venue in the city is on a subway stop. Staten Island events are shown as accessible from the Staten Island Ferry and SI Railway.

However, when combined with the transport plan to move the 16,000-strong "Olympic family" of athletes and others on separate commuter rail trains, off-limit platforms, and private high-speed ferries with special stops, such measures may feed New Yorkers' feelings that the games are an elite festival parachuted into their midst. The public and spectators will be prohibited from new ferries and the reserved trains.

NYC's application notes that the games' late summer schedule puts them into the subway system's seasonal trough, when nearly 900,000 fewer people

each day use city subways and buses (compared to the fall peak). However, projecting transit use and capacity on specific segments of the system ten years out seems guesswork at best. This would be especially the case if the robust economic conditions predicted by various tax increment financing and corporate underwriting plans indeed prevail.

The infrastructure plan for transporting the "Olympic family" is based on two transit axes, one water and one rail, forming an "Olympic X" along which most competition venues will be located. The north-south axis follows the East and Harlem Rivers and will be served by high-speed ferries. The east-west axis runs from Flushing Meadows through Manhattan, and out to the NJ Meadowlands. It will be served by "Olympic Rail" trains.

For spectator use, the application explicitly counts on **extension of the #7 subway** (the bid claims the project is receiving widespread support).

LIRR rail riders allegedly will not be inconvenienced because the plan anticipates completion of the **East Side Access project**, which will add to LIRR capacity. The project is slated to be done by 2011, but the 2012 deadline doesn't leave room for technical or funding delays. No additional accommodations are anticipated for NJ Transit riders

The city's assertion that the #7 project will not compete with other MTA capital projects will have to hold true if the plan relies on finishing the #7 project and the LIRR-Grand Central link in the same time frame. Second Avenue subway proponents have a right to be worried that it will receive lower priority.

The "X" plan shows a **rail line** heading west from Penn Station with a northwestern spur off the Northeast Corridor to **reach events at Giants stadium** and Continental Arena. The land in between is preserved wetlands. Moreover, **there is no plan for such a rail line** on NJ Transit's books. The Hudson River rail tunnel NJ needs to increase capacity for commuter rail and Amtrak is not mentioned; instead the rail spur is said only to require completion of the Secaucus Transfer Station. But none of the lines that meet in Secaucus reach the Meadowlands venues. Newark may have a transit-friendly stadium by 2012, but rail to Giants stadium would be a brand new project.

NYC2012 documents are online at www.nyc2012.com. An opposing perspective is at www.hellskitchen.net

Bergen County Light Rail, Road Project Move Forward

Last Wednesday, Governor McGreevey confirmed that the Hudson-Bergen Light Rail's northern extension will follow the **Northern Branch** instead of the West Shore Line or Bergen County's proposed cross-county route. *Mobilizing the Region* reported this as the likely decision in June (*MTR #371*). The governor said the project would move forward quickly in hopes of securing federal funding next year.

At a news conference, the governor was accompanied by Senator Jon Corzine and Transportation Commissioner James Fox. They also said a short stretch of Route 4 between Paramus and River Edge will be widened, in part to eliminate dangerous conditions for bus riders.

The NJ Transit board of directors will vote next week on a \$10 million conceptual engineering study that will move the light rail project toward a full environmental review. The Northern Branch route will bring light rail from its planned terminus at Tonelle Avenue in North Bergen to **Tenafly**. The decision ends a long competition for additional rail service in Bergen County between the Northern Branch, West Shore Line and a Cross-Bergen line.

"All three [routes] will be advanced, but this is a natural," said NJ Transit Executive Director George Warrington. "It's about getting this segment **positioned for federal aid** and getting a buildable segment ready when the [next portion] of the Hudson-Bergen Line opens in mid-2005. It's about keeping the process moving."

This week, DOT will accept bids for \$25 million in repair and construction on a 1.8-mile stretch of Route 4, which connects Routes 208 and 17 to the George Washington Bridge. It will be widened from two lanes to three, providing auxiliary lanes, better ramps and areas for buses to pick up and discharge passengers. Changes in bus routes were implemented along the route in 1995, after numerous **crashes between buses and cars in no-shoulder areas**. However, the changes reduced the total number of bus stops from 45 to 34 and created unsafe walking conditions for passengers trying to reach the buses (*MTR #49*).

Governor McGreevey said transportation investment was needed in the area. "Bergen County is the crossroads for the New Jersey and New York metropolitan region," he said. "...[I]t is imperative that we work with Senators Corzine and Lautenberg to make investments in the regional transportation network. For smart growth to work, we need to concentrate our transportation dollars where congestion and development already exists."

The announcement may have been designed to demonstrate that Bergen County will benefit from

The Tri-State Transportation Campaign web site:

www.tstc.org

voters' recent choices. Dennis McNerney was elected Tuesday as Bergen's first Democratic County Executive. McNerney and Democratic freeholders — who now hold a majority — name reducing congestion as one of their top concerns, according to the *Bergen Record*. McNerney said he is assembling a "Vision 2010" panel to advise the administration's first 100 days on several issues, including transportation.

Advocate: to Fight Traffic, Combat Sprawl

The Stamford *Advocate* brought welcome attention to the interaction of sprawl and traffic congestion in southwestern Connecticut in an editorial Friday. A recent report by Smart Growth America listing the area as the **seventh worst sprawl zone** in the U.S. had gone largely unnoticed by the local press (*MTR* #388). The paper's editorial writers, however, agreed with transportation reformers that "limiting sprawl likely will be as important as coming up with commuting options to reduce highway congestion."

The piece called for the **state to create incentives** for municipalities that attempt to rein in sprawl and focus development in areas with better infrastructure. It also called for better policies to rebuild cities.

We would add to the paper's argument by urging Fairfield County towns and regional planners to look to planning processes underway in NY's Westchester and Rockland Counties. There, **state transportation and municipal officials are working together** to solve problems in congested corridors by putting transportation projects and development policy on the table at an early stage (*MTR* #'s 267, 327). These "sustainable development" procedures also involve a wide variety of stakeholders in an attempt to limit conflict at later stages. The approach seems one of the best ways to mediate the contradiction between regional planning and home rule, which the *Advocate* identified as a central challenges for "smart growth."

Employment Opportunities at the
Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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

Details at www.tstc.org

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



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CALENDAR

November 12, 8:45am Transportation Strategy Board Meeting, Gateway Community-Technical College, North Haven. 860-594-2073 or robert.hammersley@po.state.ct.us

November 12, 3:30-5:30pm CT Transportation Strategy Board Public Listening Session, SE Corridor TIA. Three Rivers Community College Mohegan Campus, Mahan Drive, Norwich 860-383-5249 or PDelise@trcc.comment.edu

November 12, 7-9pm CT Transportation Strategy Board Public Listening Session, SE Corridor TIA. 295 Meridian Street, Groton. 860-446-4102 or clerk@cityofgroton.com

November 14, 5:30pm Voorhees Transportation Center Speaker Series, "The Implications of Back to Basics," George Warrington NJ TRANSIT director. Bloustein School, 33 Livingston Ave., New Brunswick. 732-932-6812 x700 or cdanku@rci.rutgers.edu \$\$

November 15, 8-10am Regional Business Partnership Transportation Symposium: "Importance of Freight and Passenger Rail." Joe Falbo, Parsons Brinckerhoff, George Warrington, NJ Transit and Michael Brimmer, Vice President, CSX. RBP Conference Center, 744 Broad St., 26th floor, Newark. 973-242-4203 or www.rbp.org \$\$

November 15, 9:30am-noon "Value Pricing on I-15 in San Diego: A Success Story," University Transportation Research Center. NY Technical College, Klitgord Auditorium. 285 Jay St., Brooklyn. 212-650-8050 or www.utrc2.org \$\$

November 19, 12:30pm Women's City Club of NY, "What's Ahead for Public Transit in NYC?" Katherine Lapp, MTA executive director and Elliot Sander, NYU Rudin Center director. 212-353-8070 or www.wccny.org \$\$

November 15, 2:30-4:30pm CT Transportation Strategy Board Public Listening Session, I-395 Corridor. 376 Hartford Turnpike, Hampron 860-455-0707, Klynes@eastconn.org

more calendar entries at www.tstc.org