

Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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NEWS

Succession At NJ DOT

Last week, Governor James McGreevey announced that NJ transportation commissioner **James Fox** will become his chief of staff, replacing the outgoing Gary Taffet. The change comes at an important time in the McGreevey administration. At the state's recent sprawl summit, McGreevey and Fox declared New Jersey would **stop subsidizing sprawl** by building roads into rural or relatively undeveloped areas (*MTR* #389). This was a good first step, but translating it into practice is a job still ahead for NJ DOT.

In his new job, Fox will be in position to **ensure that DOT sticks to this path**, and to work on big problems like how to finance transportation when the current state transportation trust fund deal expires in 2004. But he will also be more removed from day-to-day decision making at the department.

Fox's likely successor is Deputy Commissioner **Jack Lettiere**, who has run NJ DOT's capital program for a number of years. Meeting the McGreevey mandate to end sprawl subsidies will require Lettiere to invest more in road and bridge repair, rail freight and bike/pedestrian projects, and to figure out what to do with a number of **sprawl-causing road projects** still in the state's project pipeline (*MTR* #382).

If not, McGreevey's smart growth legacy could wind up like much else in the state: under pavement.

Port Authority Can't Afford Goethals Twin

After revising its revenue estimates, the Port Authority says it is **reducing its capital program by \$2 billion** in the next five years. That will remove the plan to build a "twin" bridge alongside the Goethals Bridge from the PA's active capital program, delaying it indefinitely, according to the *Star-Ledger*.

The **Goethals twin** proposal has been controversial in Staten Island and the Elizabeth area for many years. It has been on hold in favor of Port Authority plans that have more popular support, like the **air-trains and freight rail improvements**.

The PA capital plan has been heavily impacted by the Sept. 11 attack and the slumping economy. The Port Authority is spending much more on security.

Other projects that could be delayed include a rail freight link to Staten Island, the PATH's new fare collection system and new PATH cars.

East River Tolls:

Mayor's Least Controversial Budget Move ?

In his Thursday budget address, Mayor Bloomberg said **East River bridge tolls** are a revenue-enhancing step "that we **simply have to do**." Revenue from bridge tolls is included in the mayor's plan to close yawning budget gaps for the next three fiscal years.

You wouldn't know it from reading Friday's papers, however. The mayor's proposals on taxes have become such a lightning rod that you had to go into the *Times* or *Daily News*' fine print to catch any reference to the toll plan. During the mayor's question and answer session yesterday, **not one reporter revisited the toll proposal**.

The mayor's "gap closing" presentation showed revenue from transportation initiatives increasing over the next three fiscal years: \$200 million in 2004 (begins July, 2003), \$400 million in 2005 and \$600 million in 2006. It's not immediately clear what scenario these numbers depict. The mayor also spoke of handing the city's **franchise bus fleet** over to the MTA. The budget numbers may include savings from such a move, with tolls added over time. They could also reflect a plan to introduce tolls gradually, one or two bridges at a time. That would likely have traffic distorting effects until all bridges are tolled, however. During his presentation, the mayor moved through the toll issue very quickly without detail.

The document released along with the presentation states that **bridge toll revenue** would "**provide vital support** to maintain and improve the mass transit and vehicular traffic infrastructure for the City." It's likely that means that tolls would free city revenues now used to repair and maintain the East River and other bridges and that support the franchise bus operation and the city's contribution to NYC Transit.

Fierce reaction to the city's plan to impose an income tax for out-of-towners will likely bring the entire budget plan into a complex negotiation with state officials and possibly suburban county officials. It will also intersect with the MTA's proposed reorganization if the franchise bus issue moves ahead. Business and homeowner groups are also raising the alarm over the proposed property tax hike. Because the mayor has made such a compelling case for the

need for more revenue, the prospect for winning **state approval for East River** tolls looks better than ever.

Times Backs Tolls

The growing consensus in favor of East River tolls was reflected in the *NY Times*' lead editorial on Wednesday, which argued that: "Mr. Bloomberg knows he must raise taxes and cut spending while trying not to heap too much of the burden on any one segment of the population. He should begin with those who are carrying less than their share now. **There is no good reason, for instance, that the East River bridges should continue to be toll-free.**"

Other city dailies have also called for tolls, or at least supported a strong look at the idea. Opinion polls taken earlier this year showed that East River tolls were less disliked than the prospect of a transit fare increase or a tax hike. Mayor Bloomberg in fact has much of what he needs to begin tolling the bridges: compelling fiscal need, editorial support, public opinion that is willing to go along and advocacy groups publicly backing the idea. What he still needs is more support from city and state political elites. We will see whether his no-nonsense budget message and the ensuing negotiation can make progress with this constituency.

Region is Already U.S. Road Pricing Leader

Even as the city considers East River tolls, congestion pricing is already a reality at its **bridge and tunnel links** to New Jersey, and on the **NJ Turnpike**. Thanks in part to articles like the *Times* piece last Tuesday about consideration of new tolls and congestion pricing in Seattle, the media have been slow to recognize New Jersey as the nation's road pricing capital. The article asserted that "The **best-known variably priced tolls** are now on two highways in **Southern California.**" However, far more traffic is subject to congestion pricing in our region. The Port Authority at the Hudson crossings and the NJ Turnpike charge higher toll prices at rush hours. Their pricing applies to all vehicles, not just in a special toll lane. Both agencies have reported the leveling of growth in peak traffic as a result. In addition to the city's plans for East River tolls, there is room in the region to build on the Port Authority and Turnpike examples. Other agencies with crowded corridors, like the MTA's bridges and tunnels in New York City and the Thruway's **Tappan Zee Bridge**, would do well to apply time-of-day pricing.

The **Seattle region** is considering congestion pricing schedules for tolls that will open along with a new bridge over the Tacoma Narrows. Some planners are looking at other new tolls to pay for infrastructure improvements, and at "buy-in" lanes that allow toll payers to bypass congestion.

Gridlock Sam Urges Fresh Start For NYC Tolls

As Mayor Bloomberg was dropping his bombshell proposal for a \$2 billion commuter tax, traffic guru Sam Schwartz unveiled a radical toll-overhaul plan that he said could **generate \$500 million** in net new revenue while **eliminating 160 toll booths** and rationalizing NYC's "dysfunctional" traffic structure.

Schwartz's plan **encircles the Manhattan Central Business District** with time-variable **electronic tolls** — on all northern avenues as well as the four East River Bridges — while **erasing tolls on most TBTA bridges**, including the Verrazano, Throgs Neck, Whitestone, Henry Hudson, both Rockaways bridges and Queens and Bronx legs of the Triborough.

Schwartz envisions autos paying **\$12 to enter the CBD** during the 6-10 a.m. rush with **lower rates** ranging down to \$2 **between midnight and 6 a.m.** City residents get one-third discounts (one-half off for CBD residents), while through-trucks are socked \$50 per trip through Manhattan south of 60th Street.

"You want to charge drivers where congestion is worst and transit choices are best," Schwartz told a City Club audience last Wednesday at the Harvard Club. "This way we can reduce congestion in downtown Brooklyn and Long Island City as well as the CBD and also sneakily reintroduce the commuter tax, get big trucks off city streets, and raise revenues to maintain the bridges and improve transit."

The plan starkly illustrates the **backwardness of New York City's toll scheme** today, where cars and trucks are charged steep tolls on peripheral crossings but can drive into the most congested urban districts in the United States without charge.

Schwartz, perhaps the city's most-respected transportation expert, called his toll prices "illustrative" and said that estimates of toll impacts by county, and the possible time savings for drivers, were still pending. Some in the audience asked if eliminating tolls on non-CBD crossings went too far; halving them instead could keep \$300 million in revenue while still winning political buy-in. The deal would need to be negotiated with the Port Authority and the MTA.

Road Building, Pricing Clash in the U.K.

British transportation policy makers are embroiled in debates that sound remarkably like some of those here in the NY/NJ/CT metropolitan region, even if discussion of highway demand management policies seems more advanced over there. Planners forecast traffic growth for Britain's highways that no amount of construction can keep up with. Compare to similar estimates for Long Island by the NY State DOT.

In Britain, this has led transportation officials to consider a broad system of roadway pricing. One scenario is **per-mile highway charging** using satel-

lites to track the mileage of individual vehicles.

But like the heads of many state transportation departments in the U.S., Britain's **transport minister**, Alastair Darling is determined to **keep extending and widening roads** even if it won't help, and is drawing fire from environmentalists as a result.

According to the *Economist*, advisors to the government's forecasting work liken widening motorways near major cities to "**digging a ditch in a bog**." Traffic on London's beltway increased 18% within a year of a recent widening.

As a result, there is growing consensus among

The Case for Road Pricing in Connecticut

The CT Transportation Strategy Board is about a month away from the December 15 deadline for presenting its recommendations to Governor Rowland. One of the main issues left unanswered by the Board is how to pay for urgent transportation needs. While tolling the state's main thoroughfares is reportedly under consideration, the Board's finance working group has not issued a substantive report (*MTR* 387). Perhaps more to the point, even if the board courageously recommends road tolls, **Governor Rowland** would have to make a significant departure from his identity as a tax-cutter and **invest a lot of political capital to impose tolls** that could raise enough revenue to make a difference to the state's transportation system.

Don Strait, executive director of CT Fund for the Environment, and the Campaign's Jon Orcutt laid out a more **realistic method for re-introducing tolls** to Connecticut in a Hartford *Courant* op-ed that ran last Tuesday. They argued that tolls in CT should start with the existing **I-91 and I-84 high-occupancy lanes**, which are underused. Solo drivers could pay to use the HOV lanes to bypass congestion. Carpoolers would continue to use the lanes for free. If that worked, the piece pointed out, congestion pricing could be extended to other corridors. Another logical choice — if a bigger lift — is to make the **Merritt Parkway** a tolled, congestion-free alternative to I-95, with the revenue devoted to additional train service on the New Haven commuter rail line.

"Our neighbors, **NY and NJ**, have instituted congestion relief pricing and **have seen congestion drop**," the piece points out. "...Here in Connecticut, a 1994 study by the Department of Transportation and business and environmental groups concluded that the only way to seriously reduce congestion in

planners that **road tolls are needed** before the highway system reaches a complete standstill. The Blair administration says highway tolls will not be considered before 2011, but technical opinions say they will be needed sooner. Darling argues technology for satellite-based charging is still some ways off, and is undoubtedly waiting to see the political outcome of **London's congestion-charging policy**, which takes effect in February (*MTR* #383). Others in the policy debate say an agreement on road pricing should be articulated before major new highway infrastructure spending is approved. "It is a bit like telling the head of the Strategic Rail Authority that all rail fares are free and expect him to make plans to meet the demand," said a member of the Commission for Integrated Transport.

Paying for Mass Transit: CT Should Look to Neighbors' Examples

As it considers a variety of new mass transit projects and service enhancements, Connecticut needs **increase the resources** at its disposal to operate trains and buses. Mass transit operating budgets are subject to state budget appropriations, competing with a variety of transportation and non-transportation pressures. The state routinely raises **operating costs as a barrier to transit expansion**, and last year subjected bus riders to service cuts as Governor Rowland and lawmakers sought to trim costs.

To remedy this situation, Connecticut could follow the examples of its neighbors, New York and Massachusetts. Each of them **dedicates revenues from specific taxes** to pay for mass transit operating costs.

Within the MTA service area, **NY State** dedicates portions of a variety of tax streams to fund both transit operation and capital needs. The Mass Transit Operating Assistance Fund receives proceeds from corporate franchise, utility, insurance company, and bank taxes, and from a sales tax surcharge. Transit capital budgets receive revenue from taxes on petroleum-related businesses, retail purchases of gas and diesel fuel and from state motor vehicle fees.

Massachusetts statutorily dedicates 1% of its statewide sales tax to transit operations. The state is obliged to cover MBTA operating deficits if sales tax revenue falls below a base amount — \$645 million for 2001, rising with inflation for future years.

These systems are not perfect — in New York, for example, transit riders continue to pay a higher percentage of operating costs through fares than passengers using other systems, and tax revenues to support the capital budget are tapped out. However, if Connecticut is serious about fighting its chronic gridlock with bigger and better transit, it is going to have to find real-world ways to pay for it.

The Tri-State Transportation Campaign web site:

www.tstc.org

Suffolk County's Road Doctors

Concerned residents from Coram and Middle Island rallied in the streets last week. They objected to the NY State Dept. of Transportation's refusal to restripe a portion of **Middle Country Road** (NY 25), an east-west corridor in the northern part of Brookhaven.

The activist painted the road themselves, adding a **home-made crosswalk and citizens' cross-hatches** in the shoulders.

Civic leaders have dubbed the section the "Selden Speedway." They want the **DOT to add** to the too few number of **crosswalks** and to put warning stripes in the shoulders, which are often used by through traffic. With sidewalks largely absent, the shoulders have become conflict zones between cars and pedestrians and are locally known as "**suicide lanes.**"

Groups represented at the protest included the Middle Country Road Renaissance Project, Affiliated Brookhaven Civic Organization (ABCO), the Long Island Neighborhood Network and the Campaign.

"The DOT is ignoring measures of safety, livability and community character, those factors which determine the quality of the places we live. Instead, clinging to antiquated mandates which exist only to move cars faster and more efficiently at cost to the community," said Connie Kepert, Longwood Alliance president and chief organizer of the protest.

The DOT says that "striping changes which altered the size of lane widths could not be entertained because such would require opening the project to public review." The agency says it will **not do any work to the road until 2008.**

Praise for Mercer County Bike Path

A public-private partnership will create a **20-mile bike route** through Lawrence and Hopewell in Mercer County. The trail will connect residential centers, parks, schools and employment centers. Some portions of the path will run along shoulders, while other portions will be constructed away from roadways.

Bristol-Meyers Squibb originated the plan, and will contribute \$1 million for portions that run through its corporate centers. Over 8,000 employees work at the centers, although it is not clear how many live in areas served by the trails. **Mercer County** will also contribute \$1.2 million for construction, to be completed by the fall of 2004, and **Educational Testing Service** will contribute \$250,000 for upkeep.

Environmental commissioner Bradley Campbell and transportation commissioner Jamie Fox praised the plan for **fostering smart growth and offering an alternative to driving.**

Calendar

November 18, 2:30-4:30pm CT Transportation Strategy Board Public Listening Session, I-91 Corridor TIA. 5 Rock Street, West Haven. 203-937-3512 or alan_olenick@cityofwesthaven.com

November 18, 7-9pm CT Transportation Strategy Board Public Listening Session, I-91 Corridor TIA. 375 Windsor Street, Hartford. 860-548-7846 or siroisd@rh.edu

November 19, 12:30pm The Women's City Club of New York, "What's Ahead for Public Transit in New York City?" Speakers are Katherine Lapp, Executive Director and CEO of the MTA and Elliot G. Sander, Director of the Rudin Center for Transportation Policy and Management at NYU. 212-353-8070 or www.wccny.org \$\$

November 19, 3-5pm CT Transportation Strategy Board Public Listening Session, Coastal Corridor working group. 2725 Main Street, Stratford. 203-385-4001 or hsadowski@townofstratford.com

November 19, 3-5pm CT Transportation Strategy Board Public Listening Session, Coastal Corridor TIA. 888 Washington Street, Stamford. 203-977-4140 or jfranklin@ci.stamford.ct.us

November 20, Cool New York – A Global Warming Summit, Environmental Advocates of NY (EANY) and the National Council of Churches of Christ. Albany. 518-462-5526 ext. 240 or cvanderlan@eany.org \$\$

November 21, noon New York City Transit Riders Council. 347 Madison Avenue, 5th Floor Board Room. 212-878-7087 or www.pcac.org

November 21, 5-7pm Fall 2002 Bush Forum, New York City Transit Riders Council. 437 Madison Avenue, 5th Floor Board Room. 212-878-7087 or www.pcac.org

November 25, 2:30-4:30pm CT Transportation Strategy Board Public Listening Session, I-84 Corridor TIA. 39 West Street, Danbury. 203-743-5565 or info@danburychamber.com

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

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



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