

Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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NEWS

Warrington Makes the Rounds with "Back to Basics" Speech

In a recent series of speeches at forums such as at the Rutgers Bloustein planning school and the Women's Transportation Seminar, NJTransit executive director George Warrington is calling for "clear, honest and straightforward" talk about transit finances. His themes include how much riders need to contribute to operating costs, but his message is **implicitly aimed at Trenton**. The talk is refreshing and seems well-received by most audiences.

While Warrington has **not ruled out another fare increase**, he is clearly laying the groundwork for a claim to more state funding when the state transportation Trust Fund is renewed in 2004, or in case the state gas tax and other fees are raised before that.

For FY 2003, Trenton cut Transit's budget by the same amount the last fare increase brought in. Next year's budget crisis is likely to be as bad, or worse. No transit executive has been able to make a deal with NJDOT, the Treasurer, the Governor and legislative leaders and make it stick in the past decade. NJTransit now receives a **smaller operating contribution from the state** than it did in 1994.

In addition to securing the operating funds needed to run an expanding system and booming ridership, Warrington's "back to basics" agenda also has a capital side. It aims to get NJTransit facilities back to a state of good repair after years of deferred maintenance, targeting new capacity to relieve overcrowding, and buying new equipment. Within those goals are plans for more parking, clean coaches and improved customer service.

Warrington's has avoided directly blaming NJ Transit's fiscal plight on the Whitman Administration, but in a low-key way, he says the agency became **side-tracked by new projects** while beginning to fund operations by pillaging capital funds.

While not publicly lamenting the **Camden-Trenton light rail line**, which is expected to have low ridership, Warrington clearly does not want to extend NJTransit's reach to other projects that promise such small bang for the buck. NJ Transit will pay \$48 million annually to the operator of the Camden-Trenton line.

MTA Starts Countdown Toward Fare Increase

The MTA's board and top staff members took the unusual step on Thursday of presenting a detailed slide show on the transit umbrella agency's financial gap over the next two years, and possible scenarios for balancing the budget.

MTA executive director Katherine Lapp and budget director Gary Caplan laid out three "illustrative" scenarios to fill a two-year budget gap of approximately \$2.8 billion facing the agency during 2003 and 2004. They said other elements could be used to meet the budget, but did not specify any. Caplan said **maintaining the \$1.50 fare was out of the question** because doing so would entail radical cuts in essential mass transit service. They did not say what the situation would be after 2004.

The scenarios posited a 25-cent base transit fare increase with significant service cuts, or a 50-cent increase with varying levels of MetroCard discounts. Commuter rail fares would also rise in each scenario.

Take a Hike			
	Today	Increase scenarios presented by MTA - increment and percentage	
Base sub-way/bus fare	\$1.50	.25	.50
		16.67%	33.33%
Avg. sub/bus fares (MTA figures)	\$1.04	.10	.24 or .39 depending on MetroCard discounts
		10%	19% or 34%
Commuter rail fares	-	10%	20% or 38%
Bridge and tunnel tolls	\$3.50	.25	.50
		7%	14%

Bridge and tunnel toll prices would rise by the **smallest percentage** of any of the rates under consideration by the MTA, under all scenarios. Indeed, although MTA officials have not squarely explained

the issue, the increase plan appears to be set up to **decouple fare and toll increases**. MTA toll and fare increases have been linked for a long period — in 1995, when the city transit fare rose by 20%, tolls went up by about 16%.

Surplus revenue from MTA bridges and tunnels supports city transit and the commuter rail lines. At

Mass Transit: Who Pays?

While there are several ways to calculate “farebox recovery ratios” for transit agencies – the amount of system operating costs covered by fares – the most convenient way to make a comparison across several agencies is to use data compiled and reported by the **Federal Transit Administration**. The table below is from FTA agency profiles for **2000**.

NYC Transit enjoys the least government operating support of any big-city bus and subway based transit systems (BART being more of a subway/commuter rail hybrid that covers long distances and charges distance-based fares). Likewise, the LIRR is near the top of the list for commuter rail operations

(The information does not account for NJ Transit’s fare increase in early 2002).

System	Fares as % of operating cost
<u>Bay Area Rapid Transit</u> — subway/commuter rail, paratransit	62%
<u>New York City Transit</u> — bus, subway, paratransit	58%
<u>Long Island Railroad</u> — commuter rail	51%
<u>New Jersey Transit</u> — bus, commuter rail, light rail, paratransit	48%
<u>Chicago region Metra</u> — commuter rail	45%
<u>Chicago Transit Authority</u> — bus, subway/elevated, paratransit	44%
<u>Washington, D.C. Metro</u> — bus, subway, paratransit	43%
<u>Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority</u> — bus, subway, commuter rail, light rail	41%
<u>New York/New Jersey PATH</u> — subway, ferry	37%
<u>Los Angeles County MTA</u> — bus, subway, light rail	32%
<u>Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority</u> — bus, subway, commuter rail, light rail	28%
<u>San Francisco Muni</u> — bus, trolleybus, light rail, cable car	26%

present, however, the MTA is calling its toll increase proposal a “bridge and tunnel **security surcharge**,” which raises the question of whether the MTA intends to subject revenue from the increase to the usual formula. The MTA presentation also suggests that it intends to approve any toll increase separately from a transit fare hike, and made no mention of introducing an anti-congestion system of different peak and off-peak rates. “I’m concerned [that] a 35-year-old policy of using toll surpluses to keep fares affordable is ending,” Gene Russianoff of the Straphangers Campaign told the *NY Times*.

Toll issues aside, transit advocates say the hefty fare hikes under consideration result from the **absence of new government resources** for the MTA during the Pataki administration. MTA 5-year capital rebuilding programs in the 1980s and early 1990s were underwritten by packages of higher fares and tolls and major new tax streams dedicated to transit. Since Governor Pataki took office, the dedication of new state revenues have largely given way to bigger fare increases and increased borrowing. As a result, transit riders in NY pay among the highest shares of transit costs in the U.S. (see table at left).

Even worse, the fare hike could help underwrite the **further withdrawal of government support**. Mayor Bloomberg has expressed his firm desire to end the city’s payments for franchise bus service, and to reduce contributions for NYC Transit service. If the bus companies are simply transferred to the MTA without any provision for additional city support after a fare hike, it will represent another sizeable shift of transit costs from government to riders.

The MTA says it will approve a final fare increase plan in January, with implementation around April. Transit advocates will press their case with Governor Pataki. The Governor has distanced himself from the issue, even though he appoints the majority of MTA board members and wields enough control that he was able to order free fares on subways running to Mets-Yankees World Series games in 2000.

Fare Policy Innovations to Soften the Blow

The MetroCard discounts initiated in the late 1990’s that initially attracted large numbers of new riders are no longer fueling ridership growth, according to a study commissioned by the Straphangers Campaign and Transportation Alternatives. As a result, Straphangers has offered a plan to change the MetroCard discount system to attract new ridership and better serve low-income riders. None of the changes would reduce MTA fare revenue.

To determine the popularity of a variety of possible changes to the MetroCard system, researchers conducted phone interviews with 805 NYC residents who

had used transit within the last month. Five policy recommendations were made based on the popularity of the change and its potential for attracting higher ridership:

Offer “flexible” five-day unlimited-ride passes for \$16 that can be used on non-consecutive days. Of the riders surveyed, 65% said the flexible pass would be a “major improvement.”

Replace lost or stolen 30-day unlimited-ride MetroCards. Two-thirds of riders surveyed said that fear of losing the pass is an important factor in choosing a 7-day unlimited pass over the 30-day. MTA Chair Peter Kalikow has said recently that this improvement is under consideration.

Reduce the base fare to \$1.40 a ride, ending the current 10% bonus on MetroCard purchases of \$15 or more. This change would provide a more equitable structure for low-income riders, 41% of whom are likely to pay full fare prices. Only 13% of bonus card users are low-income riders.

Offer an unlimited-ride pass good for 14 days for \$31.50. Almost half of the low-income riders surveyed said they don’t buy the 30-day pass because of its cost. A bi-weekly pass would enable riders to spread out costs over the month.

Aggressively promote the TransitChek program. Only 23% of riders surveyed said their employers offered TransitChek – the federal program that can save workers up to 25% of fare costs a year, up to \$400, in income taxes.

Some popular choices, such as reducing the price of 7-day and 30-day unlimited ride cards, were eliminated as recommendations because they would reduce revenue. Reactions were split on other targeted fare reductions that were not ultimately recommended. Of five options that were presented to riders, 32% preferred off-peak discounts for mid-day, evening and weekend travel; 25% preferred getting 12 rides instead of 11 on a \$15 bonus MetroCard; 16% preferred a lower fare for buses than for subways; 15% chose a reduced fare for children traveling with an adult on the weekend; and 12% preferred getting a bonus trip for purchases of \$10 or more instead of \$15 or more. Further, when asked if they would prefer their top choice or not increasing the \$1.50 base fare or unlimited ride passes, **74% favored keeping current fare prices stable.**

The Tri-State Transportation Campaign web site:

www.tstc.org

Opposition Growing to LIRR Link Favored by Downtown Business

— Analysis Suggests Small Time Savings —

A Regional Plan Association analysis shows that Brookfield Properties’ proposal to run LIRR trains from Jamaica to lower Manhattan would **shave only a few minutes** off of typical commute times. The data led the Civic Alliance to Rebuild Downtown, a coalition of over 75 business and civic groups, to resolve its opposition to the Brookfield plan.

In order to provide the one-seat ride from Jamaica Station to a downtown transportation hub, over 100,000 city subway riders would be displaced to benefit only a few thousand LIRR riders. On the route, LIRR trains would use A/C subway tracks, disrupting C, F and V train routes (*MTR #355*).

In addition to benefiting few riders, the RPA study shows that the proposal would **bring many riders too far from their final destinations** to provide large time savings. A whopping two-thirds of LIRR riders on the route would save three minutes or less. One-fourth would save five minutes or more. Commuters heading to destinations near the downtown hub would save at most 7.4 minutes.

One reason for this result is that many riders will have to switch trains at Jamaica. Another is that the direct route may actually be less convenient for many riders, particularly in bad weather. Many commuters would face longer walks than they do by switching to city subways from Penn Station or the Atlantic Terminal. As a result, RPA estimates that only 52% of the 16,000 LIRR riders heading to downtown would even use the direct link.

While the Brookfield plan appears to have too many drawbacks to justify its cost, estimated between \$1.9 and \$5 billion (and an untold cost in political capital for any top-level champion), other projects are moving forward that will benefit Long Island commuters. The MTA’s East Side Access will bring LIRR to Grand Central Terminal, offering a quicker and more convenient ride for many (*MTR #274*). The Second Avenue Subway, which could also receive federal rebuilding aid, will relieve overcrowding on the Lexington lines (*MTR #377*).

RPA has proposed an alternative plan for providing more direct service from Long Island to downtown. It would build on of the Second Avenue project. A new tunnel under the East River could connect the LIRR Atlantic Branch to a Second Avenue subway line. The subway could then be constructed starting from the south, speeding the benefit to LIRR and downtown riders.

The Civic Alliance’s decision led the Real Estate Board of New York to pull out of the organization.

“Our analysis of the Brookfield proposal reveals serious issues that at least deserve further discussion, and I'm disappointed REBNY has chosen not to take part in that discussion,” Regional Plan Association president Robert Yaro told *Newsday*.

Et Tu, Bee-Line ? Less for More

Westchester County's Bee Line bus system could see a **one-two punch** of fare hikes and service cuts under County Executive Andrew Spano's proposed budget. While the County would pay \$1 million less of Bee Line's operating costs next year, riders will be asked to make up for \$3.4 million in new operating costs.

Starting April 1, Bee Line riders would pay 20 cents more per ride, up to \$1.60 from \$1.40. The fare hike would raise \$2.1 million. Probably more devastating to the system, however, is the proposal to **reduce or completely eliminate service on 41 of Bee Line's 67 routes**. Service cuts will affect 14,000 riders. Many riders whose routes would be eliminated told reporters that their only respite would be to find another job.

“I prefer going up the 20 cents and keeping this,” Lisandra Valentin, a receptionist at a White Plains medical office, told the *Journal News*, when told that the bus she was riding to work would be eliminated. “I couldn't afford to take a cab. I'm single. I have two children. I'm struggling already.”

Among the services to be discontinued are shuttle buses that feed into the Metro-North Railroad system. Nine shuttle buses that run from the White Plains TransCenter to office parks in the area will be shut down, saving \$2 million. The move will make it difficult for reverse-commuters and others who rely on the shuttles to reach office parks from Metro-North trains and bus routes that use the station. Nine other shuttles that run through residential areas to bring commuters to the train station will also be eliminated.

Bee Line, which serves 55,000 passengers daily, has not seen the ridership increases that other regional operators have enjoyed. A combination of service cuts and higher fares could further put the system in financial jeopardy by slashing ridership, which currently supports 48% of the system's operating costs.

A positive step the agency is pursuing is integration into the MetroCard system (MTR #377). While this would likely raise fares to those charged by the MTA, it could attract enough riders to stave off some of the service cuts. While BeeLine already offers discounted monthly and weekly passes, many riders would likely benefit from free transfers to New York City Transit lines. Bee-Line buses connect with New York City subways at several Bronx terminals for the No. 2, 1/9, 4, 5 and 6 lines.

CALENDAR

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

November 25, 7-9pm CT Transportation Strategy Board Public Listening Session, I-84 Corridor TIA. 83 Bank St, 4th Floor, Waterbury. 203-757-0701 or lkolodziej@waterburychamber.org

November 26, 8am-1pm Transportation Research Board meeting. Gateway Community College, New Haven. 860-594-2073 or Robert.Hammersley@po.state.ct.us

November 26, 6-8pm Auto-Free NY meeting, "Campaign to Save the Transit Fare," Susan Stetzer, Citizens Action of NYC. 212-475-3394 or www.auto-free.org

December 4, 7:30pm Public Forum on East River Bridge tolls, Brooklyn Heights Association. St. Francis College, 180 Remsen Street, Downtown Brooklyn. 718-858-9193 or www.brooklynheightsassociation.org

December 5, 11:45am Transportation Research Forum, "Bus Rapid Transit Opportunities in the New York-New Jersey Area," Leon Goodman, Parsons Transportation Group. Giovanni's Atrium, 100 Washington Street, Manhattan. \$\$

December 5, 9am Central Jersey Transportation Forum, Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission. Sarnorff Corporation, 201 Washington Road, Princeton. 215-238-2871 or www.dvrpc.org

December 6, 8am-5:30pm NJ APA Conference. Hyatt Regency Hotel, New Brunswick. www.rpa.org

December 11, 6pm Nassau Hub Citizens Advisory Committee. Hofstra University Club. 516-547-4321.

December 17, 3pm Memorial Service Dedication and Prayer Service for all who lost their lives on Queens Boulevard. Our Lady Queen of Martyrs Church, 116-06 Queens Boulevard. 718-268-7820

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

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



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