

# Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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## NEWS

### CT Panel Looks to Big Road Plan

Connecticut's Transportation Strategy Board, charged two years ago with charting a new course for transportation policy in the state, is in danger of relying on old-school, **sprawl-causing highway expansion** as a major element of its recommendations. The board will submit its final report to the state Legislature and Governor John Rowland on December 17.

The 15-member board has been meeting weekly for the past month to meet its deadline. Some observers have noted a **shift in the board's focus** as highway widenings become more prominent in the possible recommendations. If the board does focus on highway widening in its final report, failing to make a departure from the state's previous transportation policy, many will be left to wonder if the process was worth two years' time.

Some members of the board, including chairman R. Nelson "Oz" Griebel, have been tight-lipped about the upcoming report. Others, such as truck-stop magnate George Giguere, have vocally advocated for certain projects to go forward.

The pro-highway members of the board, including Giguere, have **dusted off ConnDOT plans** for expanding the Merritt Parkway, I-95 in Fairfield County, U.S. Route 6, U.S. Route 7, Route 11, I-84, Route 15 and I-395.

At a meeting last Tuesday, board members voted 7-4 to recommend widening the Merritt Parkway, I-95, and Routes 25, 7 and 8. The board indicated that it would hold off recommending new lanes on I-95 until a Southwestern Regional Planning Agency study of congestion management in the area wraps up in a month. The SWRPA study has stayed away from Merritt Parkway widening because the road is on the National Register of Historic Places.

A more forward-looking policy proposal that may also be gathering steam is placing **congestion priced tolls** on some highways. On Tuesday, board members also reviewed a proposal to recommend that Conn-DOT study congestion pricing for I-95 between Greenwich and New Haven, I-91 between New Haven and Hartford, Route 15 from Greenwich to Stratford and I-84 from Danbury to Manchester.

### Transit Unions Call for Sweeping Improvements to NYC Bus System

Representatives of NYC transit workers called last week for city and MTA officials to implement sweeping changes to the city bus system. Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 100 and leaders of the Amalgamated Transit Union endorsed widespread application of "**bus rapid transit**" (BRT) principles to city streets and bus routes.

The unions oppose the MTA's new plan for a transit fare increase, and are seeking means to make up NYC Transit's budget deficit for 2003. They argued last week that **productivity gains** from BRT improvements would greatly reduce bus system costs.

They cited NYC Transit research on bus delay due to traffic congestion — specifically, a 1994 report entitled "Faster Than Walking?" — which found that NYC Transit bus **operating expenses per revenue mile** were nearly **twice those at other big-city bus systems**, and that average bus speeds were significantly less. Since that report's publication, the Federal Transit Administration has called NYC's buses the slowest city buses in the country.

The Bloomberg Administration has made several steps to speed up buses, first by increasing the access standard on the Gowanus HOV lane — heavily used by buses from Staten Island — to three per car, and by implementing the Church Street busway in lower Manhattan (see *MTR* #'s 358, 381).

However, Roger Toussaint, TWU Local 100 president, said work to date on better bus performance constituted "half-measures" and "baby steps." The unions referred to the Straphangers Campaign/Transportation Alternatives "Bus Rapid Transit for NYC" (*MTR* #370) report released last summer that said BRT measures such as **bulb-out stops**, better boarding procedures and **better designed bus lanes** could improve speeds on city bus routes.

BRT systems that function well have seen impressive ridership gains, as well as lower costs than those on congested streets. The unions are hoping that higher bus productivity plus more rider revenue can help plug NYC Transit's budget hole.

However, it will remain unclear how much Transit could save with these techniques until there is an

official commitment to study and pursue the matter. However, transit labor's strong backing for BRT is an important development for the future of the bus system in NYC, and its push to include consideration of system performance and efficiency is a welcome addition to the debate over transit finances and fares.

### **Groups Launch Campaign to Stop Widening of Suffolk Route 16**

Concerned Suffolk County residents, community groups and the Tri-State Transportation Campaign have launched a campaign to urge **County Executive Robert Gaffney** to halt a plan to widen Portion Road (County Rd 16) in Lake Ronkonkoma and Farmingville, in central Suffolk County.

Residents recently distributed dozens of lawn signs and hundreds of fliers that read **"Stop the County Plan: Don't Make Portion Road a Highway."** The signs direct people to [www.portionroad.org](http://www.portionroad.org). The site describes the County's plan to widen Portion Road from two to five lanes, outlines some of the likely impacts of the expansion on the community and neighboring areas, and calls for a less intensive alternative. Many visitors have already emailed or written to Gaffney urging a change to the project.

The Suffolk plan would create a high-speed roadway through Lake Ronkonkoma and Farmingville. Community members first organized to oppose the plan in the spring of 2000, forming the County Route 16 Committee. The Committee recommended an alternative plan that limits widening and emphasizes pedestrian safety features and traffic calming.

While the County has been receptive to incorporating minor elements of the community's plan, like landscaping, officials are bent on adding lanes to the full stretch of road. The County has ignored both evidence that road widening induces traffic congestion and sprawl development.

"The County's plan for Portion Road will leave us with more traffic congestion in the long run, not less," said Thalia Bouklas, CR 16 Committee chair. "Our proposal for Portion Road puts the needs of the community first. The County plan accommodates traffic and will ultimately attract more congestion."

Many residents are interested in fostering a more Main Street, pedestrian-oriented environment in the communities. Widening Portion Road would likely foreclose this type of development. The CR 16 Committee will hold a community information meeting on Dec. 11 about the County plan and alternatives.

The Tri-State Transportation Campaign web site:

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

### **Bedford Residents to Drivers: Share the Road**

The town of Bedford in Westchester County has undertaken a campaign to promote traffic calming and reduce traffic along its streets. In addition to reworking the town's master plan to include traffic calming, pedestrianization of roads and design changes, the city has developed a humorous advertising campaign to educate residents.

Each ad includes a local road with a made-up road sign with warnings, such as, "Be alert: Boy trying to figure out new bike with 21 gears," and, "Go around: Right lane occupied by father and 2 twin girls in double stroller."

The ads have run in local newspapers and posters were made to hang in public places. The Bedford Coalition, a community group that originated the plan, also plans to produce T-shirts and bumper stickers with the warnings.

"It's an upbeat take on what has become a very negative issue," said William Abranowicz, a member of the Bedford Coalition. "We're trying to get people to understand that there are other people on the road."

The Bedford Coalition is active in a variety of areas that include transportation policy, local and regional land use planning, and open space preservation. For more information, see [www.bedfordny.com/community/6.htm](http://www.bedfordny.com/community/6.htm)

### **Memo to Bridge Toll Advocates: Tighten Up Your Act**

Did toll boosters blow it at a community forum last week in traffic-plagued Brooklyn Heights? Some observers thought so, and offered the following advice to those of us who advocate tolls on the East River bridges. Toll foes on the panel included City Council transportation chair John Liu and a representative of the NY Motor Truck Association.

#### **1. Give Bill Vickrey a Rest.**

Bill's stellar career conjuring pricing solutions to resource-allocation dilemmas won him a Nobel six years ago. Intellectually very compelling, but politically irrelevant.. Tolling the East River bridges isn't really about raising peak prices (though that should be part of the package). It's about turning free bridges into pay-for bridges and making subsidized drivers pay their way. Toll proponents should can the "Congestion Pricing 101" and stick to what's on real people's minds: improving mobility, being fair, and doing something about the fiscal crisis.

#### **2. Lose the grand schemes.**

"Gridlock" Sam Schwartz wants to dump NYC's "dysfunctional" toll system by instituting "cordon pricing" of traffic into the central business district and eliminating tolls elsewhere. This grand concep-

tion intrigued wonks at the City Club last month (*MTR* #392), and was offered up to *Daily News* readers last week, but it was a distraction in Brooklyn. Maybe someday the CBD will be fully E-ZPassed and the “outer crossings” made free. But first, tolls must be in place on the East River bridges, generating revenue and demonstrating “boothless toll collection.” One step at a time.

### **Campaign Urges NJ Transit to Delay MOM, Agency Needs More State Funding**

Last week, NJ Transit held two of three public scoping meetings for the Monmouth-Ocean-Middlesex (MOM) Rail Project. Although supportive of the project itself, Campaign executive director Janine Bauer issued a statement urging NJ Transit to **put MOM on hold** until the agency’s economic woes are addressed by Governor McGreevey, the state Treasurer, and the State legislature.

“Once projects are scoped and planned, expectations are raised. Then the transit agency is at risk of being forced to make project **decisions based on political factors** without appropriate long-term financing,” Ms. Bauer said.

The MOM project would use existing passenger and freight lines to expand public rail service from New York into central NJ. Three paths for the route have been proposed. The idea for MOM dates back to the 1970s, but became an official plan in 2000 when the state updated its “**Circle of Mobility**” law to include MOM as a state transit priority (*MTR* #284).

NJ Transit’s budget problems have been a major issue during much of the last decade. Although ridership increased 38% between 1992 and 2000, **state operating contributions have declined since 1994**. Due to the lack of funding, NJ Transit has had to cover its operating expenses with capital funds.

“NJ Transit has been forced to divert funds from its capital budget in order to pay for day-to-day operations. This practice threatens the long-term stability of the agency and puts recent investments at risk. Riders and taxpayers already see the signs of deferred maintenance at some stations, roads, bridges and tunnels, where capital funds would have been spent on repairs,” Ms. Bauer explained.

The first two meetings were well attended. Various officials, including Lakehurst Mayor Stephen Childers and Assemblyman Jim Holzapfel, attended the Toms River meeting to show their support.

The meetings are part of the public participation process required to complete a draft environmental impact study. The study is scheduled to be finished next year and is estimated to cost \$4 million

NJ Transit will accept comments until Jan. 3, 2003. Email [MOMcomments@njtransit.com](mailto:MOMcomments@njtransit.com).

### **3. Mantra #1: high speed.**

“I’ve come a long way in my thinking tonight,” declared one long-time toll opponent. “Now I’d like to see a gantry-mounted E-ZPass reader in action.” Too bad the panelists neglected to bring a video of working high-speed toll collection systems. If they were attentive *MTR* readers, they would have been able to point to the functioning high speed E-Z Pass installation at NJ Turnpike exit 6, and related that it’s coming to the George Washington Bridge and other Port Authority crossings, and that Governor McGreevey has committed to even more high-speed E-ZPass sites along the Turnpike and Garden State Parkway. And their arcane references to “queuing times” only reinforced fears that bridge tolls will make congestion worse, not better. Maybe an Internet analogy would help: Old tolls (2 mph) = snail mail. Current E-ZPass (10 mph) = e-mail with dialup. East River boothless tolls (>50 mph) = Internet via cable modem. No waiting. And next time bring the video.

### **4. Mantra #2: money honey.**

The fiscal crisis has landed. Services are being slashed, while taxes and subway fares are headed up. Yet no panelist bothered to put a dollar figure on potential East River toll revenues. (The people at [www.bridgetolls.org](http://www.bridgetolls.org) estimate almost \$700 million a year with current MTA toll rates.) Worse, no one challenged the nutty claim from Council Member Liu that federal law might bar the city from using tolls to balance the budget. Though Liu later left himself wiggle room to support a bridge tolls deal, he and other naysayers should be reminded that each day without tolls allow another \$1.5-\$2 million in toll revenue to slip through their fingers — and ours.

### **Westchester Bus Service on the Block**

As we reported last week, the Westchester Bee-Line bus system will be hit with huge service cuts and a fare increase if the county legislature approves County Executive Andrew Spano’s proposed budget. The deadline is December 27. Spano’s budget calls for a **fare hike of 15%** and **service cuts on 41 of 67 bus lines**. Some lines would be eliminated.

The towns of Hartsdale, Eastchester, the southern sections of Elmsford and the Bronx would all be hard hit by the service cuts. The Westchester towns are in the south-central part of the county, 15 miles or less above the Bronx line. Northern Westchester County, with few mass transit options to begin with, will also be hard hit by the discontinuation of Route 17 and major service reductions on Routes 19 and 12.

In the lower county, Eastchester residents will see major service cuts. Under the proposed plan, line 45Q will be eliminated, line 30 will experience cuts during

the morning rush, and line 45 will see morning and afternoon cuts. All three routes — the 30, 45, and 45Q — stop at the New Rochelle train station, which planners have been working to develop into a major intermodal center serving Metro-North, Amtrak, and inter-city buses. Reduction of local transit connections will **make this investment less worthwhile**.

Those using service to and from the Bronx will also be impacted. Eleven of the 19 bus lines that travel through the Bronx will be cut or eliminated somewhere along their route. These lines currently provide **vital connections to NYC subways**.

If Bee-Line does move to install MetroCard readers at some point, these lines, if service is functioning at more than a bare minimum, would likely see significant ridership growth. In Nassau County, Long Island Bus' busiest lines are those connecting to subways in Queens. Free MetroCard transfers between the buses and subways has fueled rapid growth on those routes.

The cuts anticipated in Westchester would also impact residents who ride the bus during **early and late commuting periods**. 14 lines with partial weekday and/or weekend cuts would see service cuts in the morning affected in the early morning (5am to 9am) and later evening rush hours (6pm to 12am). Most of these cuts eliminate the first or the last bus of the day.

Other lines that will be eliminated include almost all of shuttle services — Shuttles A, B, C, D, E, F, G, and H — linking neighborhoods and office parks to the White Plains train station.

The Bee Line bus system covers 450 square miles. With an annual ridership of 30 million, the Beeline system serves an estimated **100,000 passenger trips per day**. County Executive Spano blames his new county budget — which is also scheduled to eliminate 229 county positions and raise property taxes — on what he calls “runaway state spending.” He claims that most county funds are designated for state-required programs, including Medicaid, Corrections and the MTA. He says diminishing money that is available for county services in Westchester leaves him no choice but to institute serious budget cuts, such as those proposed for the bus system.

The new budget calls for saving \$2.7 million through bus service cuts, and an additional \$20 million through cuts in local jobs and county services. If approved, the cuts would take effect April 1, 2003.

Combined with the proposed bus fare hike, the cuts will mean that Westchester residents will be paying more money for far less mass transit service.

For more on this, visit **www.westchestergov.com**.

MTR#394 Contributing: Charles Komanoff, Kate Slevin Editors: Jon Orcutt, Lisa Peterson Executive Director: Janine Bauer

240 West 35th Street #801, New York, NY 10001 tel. (212) 268-7474 fax (212) 268-7333 [tstc@tstc.org](mailto:tstc@tstc.org)

## CALENDAR

**December 10, 4:15-6:15 & 6:45-8:45** Community planning workshop: Long Island Sound Waterborne Transportation Plan Study. North Shore Public Library, 250 Rte 25A, Shoreham. [www.hshassoc.com](http://www.hshassoc.com), 917-339-0488.

**December 11, 4:15-6:15, & 6:45-8:45** Community planning workshop for Long Island Sound Waterborne Transportation Plan Study. Stamford Government Center, Senior Center, 2nd Fl. 888 Washington Boulevard, Stamford. 917-339-0488 or [www.hshassoc.com](http://www.hshassoc.com)

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

**December 11, 7-8:45pm** Community Information Meeting, Portion Road widening proposal, CR 16 Committee. Sachem Public Library, 150 Holbrook Rd. Holbrook. 631-558-1915 or [www.portionroad.org](http://www.portionroad.org)

**December 12, noon** Long Island Rail Road Commuter Council meeting. 347 Madison Avenue, 10th Fl. 212-878-7087 or [www.pcac.org](http://www.pcac.org)

**December 17, 3pm** Forest Hills Action League, Queens Blvd Memorial Service Dedication/Prayer Service. “In Remembrance of all who lost their lives on Queens Blvd.” Our Lady Queen of Martyrs Church, 116-06 Queens Blvd. 718-268-7820

**December 17, 6-8pm** Auto-Free New York meeting. “De-constructing the Sheridan Expressway,” Omar Freilla, Sustainable South Bronx. 212-475-3394 or [www.auto-free.org](http://www.auto-free.org)

**December 19, noon** New York City Transit Riders Council meeting, 347 Madison Avenue, 5th Floor. 212-878-7087 or [www.pcac.org](http://www.pcac.org)

**January 7** New Jersey Gov. James McGreevey's First Annual Transportation Conference. Hyatt Regency, New Brunswick. 732-225-1180 or [www.allianceforaction.com](http://www.allianceforaction.com)

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

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