

Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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NEWS

NYC Budget Chief: Bridge Tolls "Very Likely"

The Bloomberg administration says it is still on track to implement tolls on the **East River crossings**. A report in the *New York Post* last week cited **Mark Page**, the city's budget director, who said East River tolls are "very likely" and that the administration would work throughout the next year to make progress on the initiative.

Page spoke at a Baruch College conference with eight former city budget directors. Although he couldn't specify exact timing, Page said that the tolls could possibly be implemented "in the next year or several years."

The report said East River tolls could raise up to \$800 million a year.

PA's Timetable for High-Speed E-ZPass

The Bloomberg administration has said it is banking on high-speed electronic toll collection to implement East River tolls. The technology is not in the realm of science fiction. Earlier this month, the Port Authority began testing the installation of a new 25mph E-Z Pass system on the **Outerbridge Crossing**. According to the *Staten Island Advance*, once the system is in place, the three left lanes will be designated as 25mph lanes, with adjacent booths permanently taken out of operation. The high-speed lanes will further reduce congestion at the toll plaza. The PA said it planned to have the system in place by the end of 2003.

The Port Authority's other high-speed installation will be at the Palisades Parkway/George Washington Bridge interchange.

By 2005, the PA plans to **eliminate** most of the Outerbridge's **existing toll booth structure** in favor of free-flowing lanes with E-ZPass readers positioned overhead. One or two lanes will retain a booth to handle cash transactions. The PA says over 80% of tolls collected at the Outerbridge today are paid with E-ZPass. The Authority currently imposes a 15 mph speed limit at its E-ZPass lanes.

Fare Hike = Tax Hike

Leading NY State Democrats said likely MTA fare increases clash with Governor Pataki's pledge not to raise taxes in the face of the state's fiscal crisis. Transit operating revenues that do not come from fares come from tax revenues, so the main options to fill a transit budget deficit are simple — **raise fares or raise other revenue**. Governor Pataki controls the MTA board. "Once again, the governor's rhetoric does not match the facts," **Sheldon Silver**, State Assembly Speaker, told NY 1 news.

Mayor Confirms 7-train Extension as Priority

The only transportation initiative Mayor Bloomberg mentioned in his **state of the city speech** Thursday was extension of the #7 subway train to the far west side of Midtown. The mayor pitched the project as an economic recovery and development priority. He discussed Midtown development at greater length than rebuilding lower Manhattan.

Campaign, Safety Advocates Launch Plan to Reduce Truck Crashes

On Wednesday, the Tri-State Transportation Campaign, the New Jersey Police Traffic Officers Association and nine mayors released a twelve-point platform of highway policy and law enforcement reforms to reduce truck crashes on NJ highways.

The groups called on New Jersey Transportation Commissioner Jack Lettiere to implement the reforms. Parts of the platform were endorsed by the New Jersey State League of Municipalities.

The platform is a set of twelve "common-sense measures" NJ DOT and lawmakers can implement to help reduce truck-related crashes and congestion.

The platform encourages NJ DOT to improve truck safety by **extending** the state's current **truck route restrictions** to 96-inch wide trucks, which would cover most tractor-trailers operating in NJ. The ban currently applies to only 102-inch wide, 53-foot long trucks making interstate trips.

It also calls for investment for the **rail freight** network, more in-road safety devices, better signage, lower speed limits for trucks, and a greater role for municipalities to enforce truck violations.

The platform was created in response to a recent

The Tri-State Transportation Campaign web site:

www.tstc.org

string of fatal crashes on I-78, I-80, and I-495 that caused those highways to be shut down for extended periods, resulting in highway gridlock across large portions of the state.

NJ DOT has said it is considering slower speed limits for trucks on highways with 70mph speed limits. A handful of other states enforce different speed limits for trucks and for passenger cars.

12 Ways to Increase Truck Safety in NJ

1. **Reduce truck speed:** Reduce speeds allowed on interstates and state highways for tractor trailers to 55 mph throughout New Jersey, or less.
2. **Extend the Truck Ban:** Ban wide, heavy tractor trailers making in-state trips from all highways where inter-state truck trips are banned. Extend the ban to 96" wide trucks from the current ban that covers only 102" wide, 53' long trucks.
3. **Conduct More Truck Inspections:** Step up the number of safety and weight inspections of trucks both at inspection stations and at the roadside.
4. **Install More Weigh Stations:** Install more weigh stations in areas that have disproportionate truck traffic. Combine weigh stations with rest stops.
5. **Allow Local Enforcement:** Restore the authority of municipal and county police forces to conduct roadside safety and pollution inspections of trucks and to enforce the route restrictions.
6. **Clarify the Law on Trucks' Access for Local Deliveries:** Allow municipalities to designate safe routes for deliveries, especially to construction sites.
7. **Create Safety Incentives:** Provide fiscal, other incentives for truck drivers & fleet owners with excellent safety records, such as a rebate of truck taxes.
8. **More Road Alerts:** Install in-road technological and physical safety devices such as signs that indicate overweight vehicles, reflectors along dotted lines, rumble strips, and guardrails.
9. **Improve Incident Management:** Create a permanent full-time incident management office within DOT responsible for preventing crashes, crash clean-up and traffic re-routing.
10. **Improve Effectiveness of Signage:** Install variable message signs before heavily-traveled interstate/state highway exits to warn drivers of traffic due to crashes on the next stretch of roadway.
11. **Increase the State's Investment in the Rail Freight Network:** Increase rail freight network to reduce number of trucks on highways.
12. **Charge Trucks to Use \$1 billion Portway:** Charge the trucking industry for the planning, engineering, construction and, if constructed, use of "Portway," a set of truck-only roads planned for the northern NJ port district.

Bee-Line Riders, Advocates Fight Fare Hike

Nearly 150 bus riders and transit advocates mobilized on Thursday — during the coldest night of the winter so far — at the Westchester County Center in White Plains to express frustration at the County's plan to increase fares on Bee-Line, the Westchester bus system. Most of the riders indeed rode buses to the hearing on the frigid evening.

Most told Westchester transportation officials that the proposed **fares are too high** and expressed outrage at the prospect of paying more but receiving **no service improvements** in return.

The fare increase is proposed to make up for the \$4.3 million in Bee-Line operating budget cuts imposed in Westchester's budget. An earlier plan to **cut service** on many Bee-Line routes met strong opposition and was traded for a heavy fare increase in December deliberations by the county legislature and County Executive Andrew Spano.

Under the proposed fare plan, one-way fares would increase 25%, to \$1.75. The cost of "Bargain Book" and "Monthly Passport" fare packages would go up 40% and 50%, respectively. The last Bee-Line fare hike, in 1996, was only a 12% increase.

Many riders used the hearing to vent frustration about Bee-line service, calling it "infrequent", "crowded," and "mismanaged." They were especially concerned that current schedules do not create convenient links to other transportation modes, like Metro-North trains.

Bus riders, civic groups and transportation advocates have appealed to Westchester County Executive Andy Spano to find alternatives to the fare hike. They have also asked state legislators whether they can find any funds in Albany to reduce or eliminate the increase. This week, both State Senator **Nicholas Spano** of Yonkers and Assemblyman **Richard Brodsky** of Greenburgh and Mt. Pleasant told the *Journal News* they would do what they could to find more state money.

Brodsky made his pledge in spite of disagreement with county budget policy. **"They have the money to keep the fare as it is,"** he told the *Journal News*. "Unfortunately, the county is using bus fares and a whole array of social services as pieces in a chess match about their desire to raise taxes," he said.

Assuming the fare hike would reduce annual ridership by 2.3 million (according to Westchester DOT), the fare increase is expected to raise \$4.7 million, or \$400,000 more than Bee-Line needs to fill its gap, said Bill Leverence, director of fiscal operations for the county's DOT. If ridership declined by less than 2.3 million, then the fare hike would raise even more money, which may end up going to county coffers,

rather than to better Bee-Line service. In other words, the county may be asking Bee-Line riders to help balance the County budget.

County Executive Spano did not appear or send a representative to Thursday's hearing.

County transportation commissioner Larry Sally expressed concern that "one-shot deals" from the state, such as high levels of aid in Governor Pataki's pre-election budget, are not effective in balancing the department's budget over the longer term.

Members of Transport Workers Union Local 100 distributed thousands of flyers sponsored by the union and the Tri-State Campaign on Westchester buses last week, alerting them to Thursday's hearing and urging protest calls to County Executive Spano.

Route 22 Forums Scheduled

Two meetings will be held January 28 on the proposed widening of Route 22 in the Town of Southeast, in Putnam County (see calendar for details). They will be conducted by the Consensus Building Institute (CBI), a dispute resolution company hired by the Eastern Dutchess Planning Alliance to take a comprehensive look at NY State DOT's controversial road widening scheme. CBI's final report is to consider input from local governments, environmentalists, businesses, and community groups and will study issue in the entire Route 22 corridor, rather than the 2.9-mile stretch the state plans to widen.

The sessions were scheduled after CBI's original plan to conduct one-on-one interviews with 40 local stakeholders were deemed inadequate by Southeast town officials, according to the *Journal-News*. The sessions are to proceed in a question and answer format — with CBI asking pointed questions to the attendees — rather than as an open forum.

The state plans to **widen Route 22 from a two-lane road into a four-lane highway** between I-684 and Doansburg Road in Southeast.

Since the widening was first proposed by NYS DOT 10 yrs ago, local opposition to the plan by community groups, environmentalists, local officials has slowed its progress. Many worry that increased runoff and sprawling development spurred by the road expansion will pollute two large reservoirs adjacent to the road.

In 2000, Gov. Pataki **called off the expansion of Route 120** in Westchester County because of fears of that project's impact on the Kensico Reservoir (*MTR #257*). The reservoirs in Southeast - East Branch and Bog Brook - are also part of the NYC water system.

Officials from Southeast, facing a heavy slate of development projects, are also considering imposition of fees on some developers to pay for work they say will be needed to cope with additional traffic on Route 312, west of I-84.

Groups Urge Suozzi to Return Funds to Nassau Bus System

Bus riders, civic groups and transportation advocates have appealed directly to Nassau County Executive Thomas Suozzi to put part of the county's recently announced operating surplus back into **Long Island Bus** operations.

In its budget deliberations last fall, the county again cut its contribution to Long Island Bus. With riders facing higher fares as the MTA considers increases across the region, the county's cut virtually ensured that Long Island Bus would not be able to use revenue from a fare hike to **add badly needed bus service** in Nassau County. L.I. Bus may still have to reduce service. In other words, Nassau's bus riders may be paying more for less, or at best, more for the same crowded and infrequent buses.

The county's cut also leaves bus riders without a clear **public champion** as the fare increase grows closer. Mayors and county executives often press the MTA to fully justify fare increases, and wrangle for better service if fares must rise. But County Executive Suozzi has taken himself out of the game by cutting county support for buses just as the fare hike was announced.

With a likely operating surplus, Nassau could restore the \$2 million it cut from Long Island Bus this year. County Executive Suozzi could then go to work for his bus riding constituents by looking into the need for a fare increase, and ensuring that if there is one, riders get better service for their money.

Amtrak Wins a Round in the Senate

In a sign of hope for Amtrak, the U.S. Senate has approved the railroad's request for **\$1.2 billion in federal funding** for the current fiscal year. The House of Representatives has OK'd only \$762 million, setting up a crucial conference committee decision for Amtrak.

After the House approved its transportation appropriation, Amtrak chief David Gunn said the shortfall would cause Amtrak to **shut down**, probably by this spring.

During the Jan. 16 debate on the Senate bill, Senators Frank Lautenberg and Charles Schumer spoke up in defense of Amtrak. The \$1.2 billion level was approved thanks to a successful amendment offered by Senator Patty Murray of Washington.

Amtrak critics in the Senate said they would insist on adding **institutional reform** language to the appropriation in the conference committee. Before the Congressional appropriations were approved in their respective houses, there was talk that funding would be accompanied by language proposing a **cap on federal funding for long-distance trains**.

Amtrak recently reduced fares on trains operating in the middle of the country in a bid to win riders.

The *Schenectady Gazette* reported recently that **Metro-North** Railroad had prepared **contingency plans** to serve the busy Albany-NYC corridor in the event that Amtrak goes under. The plans were apparently begun last summer when talk of Amtrak's possible demise escalated. CSX owns the tracks north of Poughkeepsie. Funding to implement the service would most likely have to come from the state.

NY State transportation commissioner Joseph Boardman told reporters early in January that **faster locomotives** for New York's Empire Corridor could be in service soon. Amtrak and NY State have been refurbishing seven engines with capability to offer 125mph service on the NYC-Albany route. But the "30-90 days" time frame didn't leave anyone holding their breath. Boardman also said the trains' top speed would be limited because **needed track work** isn't done. Amtrak has said that with its financial condition in perpetual limbo, it cannot undertake the \$140 million in projects needed to bring the tracks up to high-speed standards.

Mid-American Pols Would Kill Transit to Jack Up Highway Spending

According to the Surface Transportation Policy Project, Senators Chuck Grassley of Iowa and Max Baucus of Montana, both members of the Senate Finance Committee, have indicated plans to shift a substantial share of public transit funding to provide resources – more than \$4 billion – to prop up highway spending levels, which are already at the highest level ever. Today's annual highway level of \$31.8 billion is 15 percent higher than what TEA-21 provided.

Remarkably, the Senators' plan would **eliminate the federal Mass Transit Account** to increase funding for the highway program without raising gas taxes. The plan would terminate all federal transit assistance to areas with a population of one million or more. Senator Baucus, who also serves on the Environment and Public Works Committee, campaigned on improving transit for rural communities in the Nov. elections and increasing funding commitment to highway programs.

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



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Calendar

January 29, 8am, Citizens Union Foundation, "Strategic Planning for NYC: A Briefing by the Chair of the City Planning Commission," 212-227-0342, www.citizensunionfoundation.org

January 28, 6-8pm, Auto- Free NY Meeting, "Advocating for Greenways for NYC," David Lutz, Neighborhood Open Space Coalition, 212-475-3394, www.visions42.org

January 29, 5pm, Women's Transportation Seminar Annual Awards Program, NY Chapter, Club 101, 101 Park Ave, Speaker: Katherine Lapp, Executive Director MTA, RSVP 212-360-3061, rsvp@wtsgny.org

February 6, Noon, Transportation Research Forum, NY Chapter, "Transportation Planning in the US: An Oxymoron?" 212-435-4226, BeerTrain54@cs.com

February 21, 8:30am, Hudson County Alliance for Action Chapter Meeting, Radisson Suite Hotel, Meadowlands, 732-225-1180.

February 24, Noon, North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority, NJTPA Headquarters, One Newark Center, 17th floor, Newark, della@njtpa.org, 973-639-8406

MTA FARE HIKE HEARINGS

For more information on these hearings, see MTA website or call (212)-878-7483

February 4, 4pm, Beacon High School, 101 Matteawan Road, Beacon.

February 5, 4pm, Roosevelt Hotel, Junior Ballroom, Madison Avenue at 45th St.

February 6, 4pm, NYC College of Technology, Klitgord Auditorium, 300 Jay St, Brooklyn.

February 10, 4pm, Hofstra University, Student Center — Multi-purpose Room, 200 Hofstra University, Hempstead.

February 11, 4pm, Stony Brook University, Student Activities Center, Ballroom.

February 12, 4pm, Susan E. Wagner High School, 1200 Manor Road, Staten Island.

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