

Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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NEWS

Bloomberg Maintains Placeholder for East River Tolls, But Issue Still a Big Question Mark

In his budget presentation last Tuesday, the mayor only briefly mentioned East River bridge tolls. As in his speech for the November budget adjustment (*MTR* # 392), tolls were grouped under “regional transportation initiatives” along with reduction in city payments to the MTA and an end to responsibility for the franchise bus system. The mayor noted in passing that the transportation plans include “the **potential for tolls** on bridges.”

Revenue from bridge tolls does not appear to be included in the fiscal 2004 budget. Budget summaries show \$200 million in FY2004 from transportation policies, but these are most likely savings from reduced outlays for transit. Transportation revenue/savings grow after 2004, presumably with tolls’ implementation in fiscal 2005. In response to a reporter’s question implying that there are many one-shot revenues in the 2004 budget, the mayor said that while that may be the case in the short run, some of the abiding revenue sources he’s looking to will take time to realize. He said “transportation initiatives” are one of those – he said they would not produce for fiscal 2004, but they are something whose returns “will grow over time.”

A city hall source told the *NY Post* last Monday that the likely **timetable for East River tolls** is about **18 months**. “Most people think it’s a two year process,” said the source.

As *MTR* speculated last month (#395) the “insider” also told the paper that an inner circle of city administration officials are negotiating to have the MTA take over the bridges and the franchise bus system at once. “They’re talking about a package deal that includes the franchised bus fleet, the city’s subsidy [to the MTA] and the bridges,” the source told the *Post*.

The *Daily News* editorial page **blasted Governor Pataki** on Thursday for the opposition he expressed to East River tolls during last fall’s campaign. The *News* said new tolls were a “sensible idea.”

Other transportation elements in mayor’s budget:

- The city will seek state approval to issue 900 new taxi medallions (there are 12,187 licensed taxi medallions presently). The mayor says the move would be

worth \$196 million over three years.

- Mayor Bloomberg’s budget will keep the pressure on for state authorization for more NYC red light cameras. The city wants authority to place 100 new cameras over the next two years. The cameras are highly effective in improving public safety, and would produce a revenue benefit as well.
- The city will eliminate the off-peak discount (\$1 fare) on franchise buses on Apr. 1. Also the city will hike express bus fares by \$1 on April 1.
- The NYC DOT will hike Midtown commercial parking rates and passenger vehicle parking rates.

MTA Toll Plan a Throwback for Region

As downstate New York prepares for hearings on the MTA’s decision to increase fares, the MTA plan for bridge and tunnel tolls has largely escaped notice. In part, that is because the increase is relatively small. Where the MTA boosted its bridge toll rates 16% in 1996, this year’s proposed 50-cent increase will be less in percentage terms (14%). On the other hand, the NYC Transit base fare increased 20% in 1996, and will rise 33% if it goes to \$2 this year.

Even more notable, however, is **what is not in the MTA proposal** — any plan to offer drivers off-peak toll discounts, as several major metropolitan toll authorities have already done.

When the **NJ Turnpike Authority** increased toll rates in 2000, it raised only the prices for passenger cars paying cash tolls or driving with an E-ZPass in rush hour. E-ZPass-equipped motorists traveling during non-peak times saw no increase. The **Port Authority** followed suit with its 2001 toll hike at its Hudson River and Staten Island crossings. Prices went up for all cash tolls and for E-ZPass users during peak traffic periods, but remained at \$4 for drivers traveling off-peak with an E-ZPass.

Thus, for the MTA to increase **rush hour bridge and tunnel tolls** this year while leaving off-peak rates where they are would not be especially innovative – it would simply continue implementation of a policy that has taken root and been accepted as sensible throughout the metropolitan area.

The Turnpike Authority reports that traffic growth during rush hours has flattened out since it adopted the time-of-day-based toll schedule. Early PA reports also suggested that relatively lower prices attracted some motorists to off-peak driving times.

It is not clear why the MTA is side-stepping the issue. For years, the agency has told advocacy groups, policy experts and other agencies it is interested in and investigating the potential of variable toll pricing, but there has never been a shred of evidence that this is true. The agency has not answered any direct questions about the toll increase it now proposes posed by the Tri-State Campaign. So little information is available, for instance, that it is impossible to tell what the MTA proposes as its discount for E-ZPass users after tolls rise sometime this year.

Several years ago, MTA officials objected that variable pricing at its crossings could not work so long as the city-owned East River bridges charged no toll at all. Of course, free bridges will always compete with toll crossings. But why would a toll of \$4.50 or \$5.00 during rush hour lead to more diversion to free bridges than a \$4.50 toll in effect at all times of day? If anything, off-peak toll discounts — especially if they represent marginal or no increase over today's rate — will result in a smaller diversion during off-peak times. And of course, free bridges do not compete with crossings like the Verrazano Narrows, Whitestone and Throgs Neck bridges. Moreover, a stated goal of the Bloomberg administration is to implement tolls on the now-free bridges.

NY State Budget: No Surprises, Except NYSDOT Reform

The state budget Governor Pataki proposed on Wednesday appears to hold state aid to the MTA relatively constant (a level that cannot stave off the MTA's proposed fare increases), and makes only marginal reductions in aid to Westchester, Nassau and Suffolk bus systems.

The budget reduces the State DOT construction program by about \$115 million (to \$1.6 billion). It also cuts the "industrial access" program, which can pay for rail freight spurs to plants and warehouses, by \$6 million.

The budget document also promises that the state will advance legislation for MTA reorganization. Additionally it contains language heralding a "transformation" of the state transportation department. It says the DOT will evolve "into a more flexible, transportation solution-oriented agency." The description of the transformation is mostly vague, but says that in the coming year, the department will focus "on the identification and operation of the trade corridors that are critical to New York's economic future."

Off-peak toll discounts and less congestion at rush hour would Gov. Pataki and the MTA something to offer to their driving customers. As it is, the MTA's obsolete flat toll hike offers them nothing but higher out-of-pocket costs.

Will Fare Increases be Fair?

Last Monday, the MTA board finance committee presented ideas on fare discounts to make the proposed transit fare increases less painful for subway, train, and bus riders. Many of the points were welcome additions to the fare discussion, but all were presented very tentatively, as illustrative examples. Any package of discounts would accompany the large fare hikes — up to 33% for NYC Transit's base fare — first put forth by the MTA in November.

Many of the ideas were taken from a Straphangers Campaign report released in Nov. (*MTR* # 393). They include a two-week Metrocard, "insurance" on monthly Metrocards, and a "multi-day" fun pass. However, some fare discounts could, depending on their implementation, end up tilting benefits unfairly to better-off riders.

For example, big winners today are those who buy 30-day Metrocards. One MTA idea is to raise the price for the monthly card by only \$2-4 above its current rate of \$63 (approximately 3%). MTA data and a survey by the Straphangers Campaign show that people who make \$15-25,000 annually are unlikely to use this card, instead opting for seven day Metrocards. In the scheme floated by the MTA, the seven-day Metrocard price will rise to from \$17 to \$18 (6%). The schedule would disproportionately reward those who can afford the expensive monthly Metrocard.

Similarly, the Straphangers survey indicated that riders earning over \$75,000 are much more likely to take advantage of the 11 for 10 discount on pay-er-ride Metrocards than those making \$15,000 or less.

The Straphangers Campaign and other organizations urged the MTA to make a clear proposal including all fare discount programs well in advance of a decision to adopt any specific set of fares. Floating ideas may lend an air of debate and dialogue, but without a firm proposal, citizens, advocates and elected officials are responding based on guesswork. Public hearings for the fare increase are scheduled for next week.

Straphangers has urged the MTA to adopt the five following policies to promote fare discount benefits for lower income riders and spread the fare burden more equally among the NYC Transit riders.

- Create a 5-day "flexible pass" that would provide unlimited rides on non-consecutive days.
- Provide a system to replace lost or stolen cards.
- Create a 14-day Metrocard for \$31.50 (half the price of the monthly card).

- Lower the current base fare from \$1.50 to \$1.40 by eliminating the 10% bonus on pay per rider Metro-cards.

Promote increased participation in the TransitCheck federal pre-tax transit payment program.

Some of the main ideas floated at the MTA board committee meeting:

NYC Transit

- Add 2,226 vending machines
- Close 177 token booths
- Increase efficiency of vending machines
- Create family fare
- Create a Metrocard insurance program for monthly cards
- Devise a “multi-day” fun pass in which riders can buy unlimited card for more than one day, but can use the card on non-consecutive days
- Create a “fortnight” pass
- Encourage customers to buy up
- Encourage even bill denominations
- Encourage debit-credit purchases
- Increase weekly ridership by 3%

Commuter Rail

- 5% increase on monthly, weekly commutation fare above average fare increase
- Individual one-way fare will not increase by percentage more than 5% above average fare increase
- No fare increases for New Haven Line to and from CT stations
- Reduce monthly discounts by 1.5% for outermost fare zones
- Reduce weekly discounts by 1% to/from Manhattan
- Reduce LIRR and MNR off peak ten trip discounts from 10% to 15%
- Increase one way intermediate at higher rate than intermediate commutation fares
- Introduce senior citizen/disabled ten trip ticket
- Modify LIRR fare zone 10 and 11
- Increase price of family fare
- Implement 3 tiered pricing structure: increase on-board price by \$3, discount internet, mail sales
- Joint RR/ NYC Transit tickets.

The Tri-State Transportation Campaign web site:

www.tstc.org

Once Again, Rail Freight Over Arthur Kill

A rail trestle over the Arthur Kill will finally be re-opened to freight trains in 2005 after being out of use since 1991. The trestle will provide a vital link for freight between Staten Island and New Jersey.

The City of Elizabeth and the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey announced on January 29 that a land transfer agreement had been reached which would eventually allow trains to transport cargo containers from the Howland Hook Marine Terminal on Staten Island to the Chemical Coast Line in New Jersey.

The rail link will bring about a 10 to 13 percent drop in truck traffic -- more than 30,000 trucks a year -- on the Goethals bridge, according to Jim Devine, chief executive of Howland Hook. The *Star Ledger* reported an even higher reduction in truck traffic, up to 55,000 trucks per year.

Currently, containers taken off a ship at Howland Hook are trucked across the bridge to NJ. The reopening of the trestle means that containers will be moved directly to freight, and then carted over the Arthur Kill.

The deal was ratified by Elizabeth City Council earlier this week; The Port Authority will meet on February 20th to approve the deal.

The rail facility currently under construction at Howland Hook is also due to be completed in 2005.

CT Pedestrian Safety Bill Pending

The CT legislature’s transportation committee will soon schedule a hearing to consider a bill to fund “safe routes to school” projects throughout the state.

Cities and towns have worked with the CT Bicycle Coalition over the last several years to plan sidewalk, traffic calming and bikeway improvements between residential neighborhoods and school sites. However, ConnDOT has provided little funding for identified improvements.

The bill, PHB 5687, would designate 15% of the federal “hazard elimination” funds ConnDOT receives from the FHWA for a safe routes to school funding program. A similar bill was introduced but not enacted last year.

The Bicycle Coalition has publicized the fact that pedestrian fatalities make up an average of 16% of all of our motor vehicle-related deaths in Connecticut, and argues that the bill would begin to redress a public safety issue that state government ignores.

The proposed legislation is supported by CT Safe Kids, CT Chapter of the American Planning Association and Transportation Choices Coalition of CT (of which the Tri-State Campaign is a member). It is sponsored by Rep. Tim O’Brien of New Britain and co-sponsored by Dep. Minority Leader Brian Flaherty.

More information on the effort is available at www.ctbike.org (follow the “programs” link).

Status of Bike Ways in Central NJ: One Step Forward, More Qs Raised

At long last, Middlesex County freeholders have finally acquired the unused Conrail freight railroad right-of-way that has come to be known as the Middlesex Greenway in Edison. The 40-acre corridor cost the County \$1 plus closing costs; advocates including the Middlesex Greenway Coalition, the Edison Greenways Group and others, will now push for extension of the bike trail to Perth Amboy, and a connection to the Rt. 1 "power trail" in Woodbridge and Edison allowing cyclists to criss-cross the county off-road but still connect to major destinations. The freeholders had been considering the bike project since 1996, but the Conrail merger waylaid it and subsequent talks went nowhere; finally, after the County voted to use its eminent domain powers, Conrail decided to sell the right-of-way.

The Rt. 1 power trail, to which it logically should be connected, has made little progress, however. Originally included as a mandatory condition of the widening of Rt. 1 because the widening triggered a Congestion Management Study analysis that showed the lane addition would add significant SOV trips to Rt. 1, the power or utility corridor trail (so named because DOT preferred to locate it along the PSEG utility corridor next to Rt. 1) was slated to move forward when construction of the additional lane finally got underway. But that widening project is now in the 2003-2005 TIP, which states that, "This project will be bicycle pedestrian compatible where possible." Unless that's code for the power trail, it's a violation of the agreement reached at NJTPA when the project was first approved. When approving the Middlesex Greenway, the County freeholders specifically included language approving the Rt. 1 trail, considering the growing demand for safe cohesive network of bike facilities, and noting that it had the unanimous support of the municipalities of Edison, Woodbridge, Metuchen, Highland Park and New Brunswick.

Another Middlesex project with too many fits and starts to count still isn't in the TIP or proposed capital program for Mar. 1, 2003: the George Street Bikeway between Douglass and Rutgers College campuses. It's hard to think of a more appropriate and well-used

corridor for cyclists, and the project has support of local elected leaders and planners. Why isn't it moving forward after all this time?

Reportedly, NJ DOT is now considering turning the Rt. 18 extension ROW in Wall Township into a bike-way. DOT blighted the neighborhood by acquiring the right-of-way and then never built the highway. Citizens there have asked for a bikeway.

But overall, progress on the Gov. Whitman/NJDOT goal of constructing 2,000 miles of bike paths in 100 years (or the Trust Fund Renewal Law goal of constructing an additional 1,000 lane-miles of bike paths in 5 years) has slipped away without much progress. NJDOT claims it can count signed roadways toward the goal; bike advocates say that's not true.

Tri-State Transportation Campaign's case against NJDOT for failure to live up to the goals in the Trust Fund law, including bike goals, will be heard in the Superior Court, Appellate Division on Mon., Feb 3rd.

Calendar

February 3, noon, NYC Transit Rider's Council meeting on proposed fare increase, token booth closings, 347 Madison Ave, 5th floor, 212-878-7087

February 6, 7:30pm. Natural Resources Protective Association Annual Meeting, Richmond County Yacht Club, SI, 718-987-6037, kerrysull@aol.com

February 6, noon, Transportation Research Forum, NY Chapter, "Transportation Planning in the US: An Oxymoron?" 212-435-4226, pguessner@panynj.gov

MTA Fare Increase Hearings

Call 212-878-7483 for information on all hearings.

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

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

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

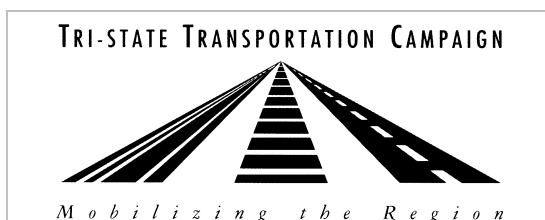
February 10, 4pm, Hofstra University, Student Center, 200 Hofstra University, Hempstead.

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

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

February 13, 4 pm, Westchester County Cntr, Little Theatre, 198 Central Ave., White Plains.

more calendar entries at www.tstc.org



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