

# Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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## NEWS

### MTA Position on Tolls Remains Incoherent

On Tuesday, the Tri-State Transportation Campaign released a report by Komanoff Energy Associates that shows the MTA could offer drivers **congestion-busting off-peak toll discounts** without sacrificing the revenue it hopes to raise with its pending bridge and tunnel toll increase.

The paper, "A Value Pricing Toll Plan for the MTA," analyzes driver response to past MTA toll increases and calculates that a system of time-variable tolls – higher at rush hour, less at other times – could save commuters time while offering significant savings to motorists traveling outside of peak traffic periods.

A story on the report in Wed.'s *SI Advance* cited an MTA spokesperson who lamely claimed that variable tolls were impossible to implement in NYC because of competition from un-tolled city-owned bridges.

But by that logic, the free bridges would lead all motorists to shun the East River tunnels and Triborough Bridge today. Off-peak MTA discounts would in fact reduce diversion to the free bridges. And of course, as the *Advance* pointed out, the MTA's **excuse is irrelevant** regarding the **Verrazano, Throgs Neck** and **Whitstone** bridges, which have no free competition. Variable pricing is already in place at all Hudson River and Staten Island-NJ crossings.

The Komanoff report looks most closely at increasing rush-hour tolls to \$5, while keeping off-peak rates at \$3.50. Like the MTA's proposal to raise all tolls to \$4, the plan would yield about \$100 million in additional toll revenue per year. However, the report finds that variable tolls would reduce typical rush-hour round trips by 1-2 minutes, which, aggregated over the millions of peak trips made yearly by commuters, truckers and others, may be worth as much as \$36 million annually.

"Variable pricing comes close to being a **'win-win' strategy** for MTA tolls," said Komanoff, a veteran public-policy economist. "The MTA gets needed revenues, while peak travelers get quicker commutes in return for shouldering the higher tolls."

The Campaign sent an early version of the paper's analysis to the MTA in early Dec., requesting comment. The MTA has not replied. The paper is available on-line at [www.tstc.org](http://www.tstc.org). ❖

### McGreevey Budget Spares NJ Transit Fare — Capital Budget Still Under Pressure —

Governor James McGreevey's budget proposal maintains last year's level of support for NJ Transit operations, avoiding what some advocates feared would be the second fare increase in as many years.

During last year's fare hike proceedings, NJ Transit authorized future increases to account for inflation. However, it added a provision requiring public hearings for **each separate action on the fare** after an outcry over the prospect of annual hikes.

The Governor proposed to devote \$260 million in state revenue to NJ Transit's operating budget — the same amount as last year. NJ Transit said it would reduce spending by \$55 million, by eliminating 170 non-union positions and via other cost-cutting moves.

During the last fiscal year, NJ Transit was forced to transfer \$260 million from its capital budget to pay for day-to-day operations. The capital budget pays for construction, major equipment upgrades and purchases like new trains and buses.

**The capital budget will be similarly depleted this year.** NJ Transit chief George Warrington has said repeatedly that this practice is untenable, and that it may already be **causing deteriorating conditions** in some stations. Extended capital budget raiding will lead to higher future costs when major overhauls are needed to catch up with neglected infrastructure and vehicle maintenance. Trenton will have to fix this problem in 2004, when it reauthorizes the transportation trust fund.

Transit will also likely face higher operating costs as service begins later this year at the Secaucus Transfer station and on the Camden-Trenton light rail line, and operates service through the Montclair connection for its first full year. Nearly 400,000 people use NJ Transit trains and buses each day. ❖

### MTA Fare Hike Hearings Begin

Rowdy crowds angered by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's plan to raise transit fares and close station booths filled hearings in Manhattan and Brooklyn last week. Hundreds attended each of the events, which featured chants such as "no fare hike!" and "open the books!" and signs that read: "Want Safety? Keep the Booths Open," and "Kids Need

Clerks.”

No one testified in favor of the fare increases or the closure of station booths.

A selection of sound bites from testimony to MTA board members and leading staff:

**NYC City Council Speaker Gifford Miller:** “This fare hike is a job-killing tax hike.”

**State Assemblymember James Brennan:** “It makes no sense in this city to propose the smallest increase for drivers (referring to bridge tolls) and the greatest for bus and subway riders.”

**State Assemblymember Deborah Glick:** “Gov. Pataki says no to a commuter tax. This fare hike is a commuter tax!”

**City Council member David Yassky** “Good, affordable mass transit makes the city liveable and attractive. Let’s not go backwards.”

**Congressman Jerrold Nadler** “Fare backed bonds and state government’s abdication of responsibility for the transit system mean this isn’t just the \$2 fare of 2003, it’s many more fare hikes to come...Do the right thing. Do not be a transmission belt. Rebel against Gov. Pataki and denounce the fare increase.”

**State Senator Liz Krueger:** “The decisions we make now will determine if our mass transit systems continues to move forward and meet the needs of New Yorkers, or if it regresses and again becomes perceived as a dangerous and unreliable mode of transportation.”

**City Council member James Davis** “When I was a transit cop, we worked with the clerks. The clerks are the eyes and the ears of the system. They are the eyes and ears of the public. Closing booths will allow crime to rise. The blood will be on the hands of the MTA! The blood will be on the hands of Governor Pataki!”

**City Council member Yvette Clarke** “This proposal sounds like it was created by someone who drives in from the suburbs.”

**State Assemblymember Annette Robinson** “Once the booths are closed, who are we gonna call – Ghost Busters?”

**Gene Russianoff, Straphangers Campaign** [to crowd] “Who is the one man who can stop the fare hike and keep the booths open?” Crowd: “Governor Pataki!”

Hearings in the suburbs and city continue for the next two weeks – see calendar on page 4. ❖

The Tri-State Transportation Campaign web site:

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

### LIRR Third Track Project Derailed?

A notice in the procurement section of the MTA’s website lists the contract to undertake the environmental impact statement for the LIRR Main Line third track project as “cancelled.”

A third track on the LIRR Main Line — roughly between Jamaica and Hicksville — is needed to allow the railroad to meet demand for **more peak period rail service**, including more “reverse” commute trains for NYC residents who work on LI. It is an important complement to the LIRR connection to Grand Central Terminal, and would be a condition for development of a **rail freight yard** at the Pilgrim State Hospital site. It is supported by environmentalists, transit and smart growth advocates and the LI business community.

The project faces some opposition in the Nassau state legislative delegation, and has significant competition within the MTA capital budget. It is unclear, however, why the EIS contract, which is not a big-ticket item, has been cancelled at this time.

The LIRR press office referred *MTR* to the railroad planning staff, who did not return our call. The LIRR has refused to discuss the project with anyone outside of the MTA for a lengthy period. See [www.mta.info/lirr/procurement/current.htm](http://www.mta.info/lirr/procurement/current.htm) ❖

### East River Tolls Gain Ground in Albany

State Senate Majority Leader **Joseph Bruno** said last Thursday that East River bridges tolls were a “strong possibility.” As Bruno told a *Crain’s* forum, “We’re wide open on that issue. I think there’s merit in people that use particular facilities pay as they go.”

Mayor Bloomberg has said repeatedly that he is for the tolls, and has included them as a future year revenue initiative in several city budgets.

However, in response to Bruno’s remarks, State Assembly Speaker **Sheldon Silver** poured cold water on East River tolls in comments to NY 1 News. Silver argued that new tolls would produce **congestion** on and around the bridges.

Silver should seek briefings from Mayor Bloomberg and transportation experts on state of the art roadway tolls. East River bridge tolls are in fact likely to reduce congestion at the now-clogged bridges. First, the mayor’s plan calls for **barrier-free** electronic toll collection. Second, the tolls would **reduce traffic diversions** to the East River bridges from traffic that would naturally use MTA East River tunnels and the Triborough Bridge. Third, **higher rush hour rates** will move some East River traffic out of peak periods and into less crowded times.

The tolls could raise \$800 million a year and help the city close part of its \$3.4 billion deficit.

Governor Pataki has not made any recent statements about new tolls, although his spokesperson last week said the governor would “prefer other options.” ❖

## Rebellion Against MTA Overhaul Brewing on Long Island

Last week, Nassau and Suffolk state legislative delegations sent a letter to Metropolitan Transportation Authority officials requesting more information on the proposed MTA restructuring. The restructuring — which would place LIRR and Metro North under one large umbrella “MTA Rail Road” agency and absorb Long Island Bus into the NYC Transit bus division — was announced last November. But the Long Island officials complain they have not been given any further information about **what the merger will mean for the**

### Hold that Hike!

#### State Officials Will Press for Bee-Line Relief

As the date for Westchester Bee-Line bus fare increases looms, several state elected officials have agreed not to take the increases lying down. Assemblyman Brodsky and Senator Spano have both agreed to look for state relief to prevent, or at least tone down, the severe fare hikes approved by the County Transportation Board late last month.

Meanwhile, transit advocates, community groups, and riders are asking that Westchester County DOT put **all fare increases on hold** until further information about state aid is known.

Furthermore, the groups are urging the County to:

- Implement fare increases **incrementally**, so they can be calibrated according to the size of state aid package.
- Commit to investing all **increased revenue** from fare hikes **in transit**.
- If, as the County maintains, fare increases are needed to balance the Bee-Line budget by \$4.3 million, any revenue collected beyond \$4.3 million should go towards reducing, or eliminating, the fare increase. Transit riders should not shoulder the burden for County budget woes.
- Immediately commission an **independent audit** of Bee-Line. Complete disclosure of Bee-Line books is the only way for riders to really understand how the County is managing their fare money. However, accounting gymnastics, such as having all fare money go directly to Liberty Lines, the private company that runs most Bee-Line buses, would make a comprehensive audit challenging.
- **Hire at least two full time staff** dedicated to monitoring Bee-Line service, a recommendation made to the County nearly a year ago by their own independent consultants, in the study "A Comprehensive System Analysis for the Bee-Line System."
- **Add performance standards** to all contracts between the County and private operators. Currently, County bus contracts have no carrots — or sticks — they can use to ensure good quality of service. ❖

**LIRR**. The MTA says the rail merger will save it \$30 million annually.

The Long Island lawmakers' concerns may point to a rough road for the MTA reorganization plan, because it must be **approved by the state legislature**. The legislators were already angered by what they viewed as inadequate efforts by the MTA to keep LIRR president **Ken Bauer** aboard. Bauer was well-liked, but announced his resignation earlier this month.

The letter was sent from the office of Senator Dean Skelos, Deputy Majority Leader of the State Senate and Senate representative to the MTA Capital Program Review Board, and was signed by the entire state legislative delegation from Nassau and Suffolk Counties. It acknowledged the “MTA’s desire to augment efficiency and alleviate the pressures places on fares and other revenues” but indicated that “the absence of detailed and comprehensive programming information has tainted this proposal with uncertainty and doubt.” It asked that the MTA provide Nassau and Suffolk representatives with “substantive information necessary to properly evaluate this proposed reorganization” and expressed concern over possible negative impacts on train service.

Senator Skelos told *Newsday* in a Jan. 31st article that “We (the legislative delegation) don’t want to be lost in the shuffling around.”

Senator Skelos also recently asked the MTA to schedule **separate fare increase hearings** in Nassau County for LIRR and LI Bus issues. He argued that at a joint hearing, **Long Island Bus** issues, which are very distinct from those of the LIRR, would tend to be subsumed and receive less attention. However, the MTA has refused to schedule an additional hearing.

Hearings on MTA fare increases continue for the next two weeks (see calendar, page 4). ❖

### Majority of CT, NJ Roads Need Work

A study released earlier this month by the **Surface Transportation Policy Project** (STPP), a transportation policy group based in Washington, D.C., reported that New Jersey and Connecticut ranked among the 10 worst states for overall road conditions.

The STPP report entitled, “The \$300 billion question: Are we buying a better transportation system?” used ten years of federal transportation spending data to examine road conditions, bridge conditions, traffic safety, air pollution and bike/pedestrian safety.

**NJ ranked 42nd** out of 50 states for overall road condition quality; **CT ranked 44<sup>th</sup>** on the same scale.

The Federal Highway Administration ranks road conditions as “poor,” “mediocre,” “fair,” “good,” or “very good,” depending on “International Roughness

Index” ratings, which measure bumps in roadways. STPP used these values to rank pavement quality in each of the states.

The STPP report stated that in **New Jersey**, 74% of all roads and 82% of urban roads in NJ were in less than good condition. Yet in the last decade, only 23.7% of NJ’s federal transportation funding went to road repairs — for every dollar NJ spent on existing roads, the state spent \$1.20 on new roads.

The “**fix-it-first**” mandate of 2000 required NJ DOT to repair half of all structurally deficient roads and bridges within five years. Yet NJ DOT has repeatedly admitted that it has not made progress toward the goal.

Gov. McGreevey recently said in his State of the State speech that **road and bridge repair would be prioritized**. The STPP study shows that the state has its work cut out for it. DOT’s capital program will be submitted to the Legislature on March 1<sup>st</sup>.

Tri-State sued NJ DOT in 2001 for failure to comply with the legislature’s fix-it-first provision. Oral argument for the suit, in the Superior Court, Appellate Division, was heard last Monday.

Similarly, according to STPP, almost 80% — or 30% more than the national average of 50% — of **Connecticut’s roads** are in less than good condition.

The recent **CT Transportation Strategy Board** report states that over \$3 billion in capital spending will be allocated to new roads and bridges. The Connecticut DOT has a long list of highway expansion projects on its books, and the Strategy Board report calls for more.

Although ConnDOT launched a highly publicized effort to fix highways in the 1980s and 1990s, municipalities say the state beggars the local road system. An October, 2000 report by the CT Conference of Municipalities put the **repair bill for local road and bridge systems** at well over \$300 million. The Conference says inflation-adjusted levels of Town Aid for Roads — the state’s main local aid transportation program — have been dropping since the 1960s.

Last year, a report by a road industry group, The Road Information Project, also found that CT roads are among the worst in the nation. At the time, only Calif., Mass. and Missouri had a higher portion of roads in mediocre or poor condition, according to TRIP.

The full federal funding and road condition analysis from STPP is on-line at [www.transact.org](http://www.transact.org). ❖



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## CALENDAR

**February 13**, 10am, City Council hearing: “Vision for Transportation Infrastructure Downtown: Improved Transit Connections and Facilities in the Rebuilding of Lower Manhattan,” 212-788-7210

**February 18**, 7pm, BQE Reconstruction Public Information Meeting, Lexington School for the Deaf, 75th St and 30th Ave, Queens, 718-424-4157

**February 20**, 1:15pm. NY Metropolitan Transportation Council program committee meeting. 11-15 47th Avenue, Long Island City, Queens. 718-472-3046.

**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](mailto:della@njtpa.org), 973-639-8406

**February 25**, 6-8pm, Auto-Free NY Meeting, "East River Bridge Tolls- a Boon for New York," Charles Komanoff, Bridge Tolls Advocacy Project, 212-475-3394, [www.auto-free.org](http://www.auto-free.org)

**March 5-7**, 2003 National Bike Summit, League of American Bicyclists, 202-822-1333, Washington D.C., [bikeleague@bikeleague.org](mailto:bikeleague@bikeleague.org)

### MTA FARE HIKE HEARINGS

For more information on these hearings call (212)-878-7483.

**February 10**, 4pm, Hofstra University, Student Center, Multi-purpose Rm, 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

**February 13**, 4 pm, Westchester County Center, Little Theatre, 198 Central Avenue, White Plains

**February 18**, 4pm, Bronx County Building, Rotunda, 851 Grand Concourse, Bronx

**February 19**, 6pm, Queens Borough Hall, Central Jury Room, 120-55 Queens Blvd, Kew Gardens

**February 20**, 4pm, Palisades Mall, Adler Community Room, 1000 Palisades Center Drive, West Nyack

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