

Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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February 18, 2003

NEWS

East River Tolls a Snap Next to London's Complex Pricing Plan

To any East River bridge toll foes who may seize upon start-up problems with London's "congestion charging" central area cordon pricing plan – set to begin operation today – we offer these pre-emptive rebuttals:

1. Because of the Hudson and East Rivers, **Manhattan's "cordon" is far simpler** than the artificial boundary Mayor Ken Livingstone and his transportation chiefs have drawn around central London, to be enforced by an extensive array of cameras. Indeed, the Manhattan pricing cordon is already half-complete, thanks to the smoothly-functioning congestion pricing system operated by the Port Authority at the Holland and Lincoln Tunnels and the GW Bridge.

2. London's plan depends on the launch of a **new pre-payment infrastructure**. Drivers need to pre-pay by telephone or other means for each day they enter the central area, or risk steep fines when spotted by the camera network. Predictions of chaos on Monday made late last week centered on the fact that only about 10% of the estimated 100,000 drivers expected to enter the central area Monday had paid for the day as of Wednesday night. Would the call centers be overwhelmed Monday morning?

In NY, on the other hand, the account infrastructure for the E-ZPass system that would be used on the East River bridges is already well established, and many motorists who would use the bridges already hold tags and accounts.

Initial kinks aside, however, we believe London's plan will prove a success. It's worth remembering recent innovations in our region that were dogged by criticism in early stages, but that are now taken for granted. Early focus groups found the MTA's MetroCard "time-consuming, undependable, a hassle to buy and embarrassing to use." And we haven't forgotten the shrill tabloid headlines that greeted traffic mix-ups when the MTA opened its first E-ZPass lanes at the Midtown Tunnel and other crossings.

There may be chaos in London as its system undergoes its early trial by fire. But its critics — and opponents of East River tolls — have not articulated any alternative to worsening congestion. They stand only for the status quo.

Sensible Downtown Transit Priorities

The plan Governor Pataki outlined to federal officials for rebuilding the transit system in Lower Manhattan recently encompasses a sensible group of projects that can be largely accomplished **without tapping funding needed for other projects**. It does not appear poised to break into other areas of the MTA's capital program, for instance.

The plan calls for sizeable new stations at the World Trade Center site, at the Fulton Street subway complex and at the Whitehall ferry/subway station. The Trade Center site and Fulton Street centers would be linked underground. It also provides for a badly needed **downtown bus facility**. The Whitehall project would join the 1/9 and N/R subway lines at the ferry terminal at the tip of Manhattan. The *NY Times* reported that the plan's price tag is \$5.15 billion, while available federal aid for the projects is \$4.55 billion.

Some editorial pages in the city complained about the absence of a new commuter rail link downtown, but as usual suggested no way to pay for an **additional multi-billion dollar element** nor said what else it was willing to sacrifice in order to see it built. *Newsday*, for instance, appears to want construction of the LIRR-Grand Central connection, the Second Ave subway and a new LIRR tunnel to lower Manhattan simultaneously.

Reports suggest that one of the downtown stations would reserve space for a future airport/commuter rail link, but the plan does not provide any near-term resources to work on such a line.

NJ DOT Refuses Lower Truck Speed Limits — Crashes Continue —

This week New Jersey DOT officials said that they would not recommend lower speed limits for trucks on NJ highways. In January, NJ transportation commissioner Jack Lettiere indicated that the agency would consider reducing the speed limit for trucks to 55mph on NJ roads and keep limits for cars at 65mph.

In a *Home News Tribune* article this week, Kris Kolluri, DOT chief of staff, said lower speeds limits for trucks **"won't work here in New Jersey."** 17 states currently have speed limits for trucks that are lower than that for other vehicles.

Mr. Kolluri's comments were bad news for mayors, safety groups, and the Tri-State Transportation Cam-

paign, all of whom pushed for the lower speed limit in the aftermath of a series of devastating truck crashes on New Jersey highways in December.

West Side Story: Parking and Traffic

New York City's emerging plan to develop Manhattan's far west side into an extension of the midtown business district calls for **tripling the supply of parking** in the area. That feature of the plan may belie official statements that an extension of the #7 subway train will provide the chief means of access to an expanded convention center and new stadium.

A public forum about the plan drew thousands of officials, residents, and construction workers last week. The Feb. 10 meeting, hosted by the Dept. of City Planning and the NYC Economic Development Corporation, highlighted the city's plan for the development of the "Hudson Yards" – an area encompassing the 360 acres from West 28th to West 42nd Streets, between 8th Ave. and the Hudson River.

The area, now featuring the Javits Center, light industry, low-rise apartments, parking and automotive facilities, would be transformed into an extension of the midtown business district, complete with high-rise office buildings and residential towers, an **expanded convention center**, hotels, and a **new stadium** for use by the Jets and the 2012 Olympics.

The forum also clearly highlighted that access to this new high-density western business district will be more car-centered than pronouncements have so far indicated. Two new streets would be created between 10th and 11th Aves and preliminary plans call for approximately **50,000 new parking spaces** to be provided (almost double existing parking facilities). The parking plan builds on City Planning's Dec. 2001 report, which stated that development would "replace and supplement displaced (existing parking) spaces by requiring on-site parking as a component of new development."

Officials did not venture an estimate on the transportation "mode split" for access to jobs, events and other destinations. They will need to as the plan moves forward, because **criticism about the traffic and congestion** the plan will generate will continue to grow.

Newsday questioned whether the #7 extension will **divert funds** from the Second Ave. subway and if expanding midtown will detract from downtown renewal and long-held plans for Long Island City and downtown Brooklyn. The *Daily News* argued the opposite, citing the area's desolation and the need for subway access to a larger Javits Center and stadium.

At the forum, City Councilwoman Christine Quinn, State Assemblyman Richard Gottfried and Manhattan Borough President C. Virginia Fields all expressed grave concerns about allowing the area to become a new traffic-ridden midtown.

The groups included lower truck speed limits as part of a 12-point truck safety platform released earlier this month. It lists other common sense measures — increased truck route enforcement, increased rail freight capacity, and extension of the local route truck ban to 96" wide trucks — that will reduce truck related traffic fatalities on NJ roads.

NJ DOT has created a safety task force to develop a plan to increase highway safety. They are scheduled to release a list of recommendations later this month.

But **the longer they wait, the more people will die.** Last Monday, a tractor trailer on the NJ Turnpike slammed into the back of a sedan, killing the driver. Witnesses said the truck driver, who fell asleep at the wheel, was traveling between 75 and 90mph.

Mayor Bloomberg's Transportation Report Card

Mayor Bloomberg's comprehensive look back at his campaign promises issued Feb. 10 contains a great many references to large and small transportation policies, projects and ideas. While some of them seem rather removed from mayoral responsibility — the report listed a variety of elements of the MTA capital program like subway signal upgrades and passenger information systems that were begun years ago and would still be underway regardless of the mayoral election — many that are city government's job are important to public safety, the efficiency of the transit system and the city's quality of life.

What's best about the report is that **promising developments** such as upgrading HOV lane rules to three-per-car, adding bus lanes to major streets, building waterfront greenways and seeking greater authority to employ red light and speed cameras in traffic law enforcement are listed as "launched" initiatives. In other words, they are underway, with more to come. Since taking office, the mayor has increased the occupancy rule on the clogged Gowanus Expressway HOV lane, added a bus lane to Fordham Road and initiated the Church Street bus-way, augmented ferry service and added segments to the Manhattan circumferential bike-pedestrian way. The report card implies that HOV-3 rules are in the works for the HOV lane approaching the Midtown Tunnel along the L.I.E., and that more bus lanes are coming. Unfortunately, expanding automatic traffic law enforcement in the city has been stymied by upstate State Assembly members, reportedly at the behest of Speaker Sheldon Silver. The report also implies that Brooklyn-Whitehall ferry service will be reevaluated this year.

We hope that several initiatives that **the mayor lists as "done"** are in fact ongoing programs that will be expanded. For instance, the new bike lanes and pedestrian-phase traffic signals NYC DOT has installed

over the past year are very welcome, but the job of improving the city's walking and cycling environment is far from complete. Likewise for crackdowns on double parking, further extension of curbside parking pricing programs and excessive use of city government parking permits.

Additionally, the **"get going already"** department must include the long-awaited study to revise the city's truck route system and action on the mayor's promise to implement a bus rapid transit "surface subway" on Manhattan's East Side. The truck route study has been in the works at NYC DOT for years, and it's difficult to understand why it has not yet begun. Similarly, MTA

Fare Hike Coverage: Long Island Bus Riders Erased

Although many citizens who attended last Monday's MTA fare increase hearing in Nassau County were local bus riders, coverage of the event in both the *NY Times* and *Newsday* wrote Long Island Bus out of existence. LIRR fare changes and service cuts were discussed at length in both articles, and *Newsday* ran an on-line poll on Tuesday asking readers whether they agreed with the "LIRR fare increase."

L.I. Bus typically carries about 115,000 passengers per day in Nassau County, about one-third the number the LIRR carries on the entire island.

About 50 people attended the hearing, held at Hofstra University. All of them voiced objection to the MTA's proposals to increase fares or reduce service. Only one elected official, Mayor James Garner of Hempstead, was among them.

In January, State Senate Deputy Majority Leader **Dean Skelos** urged the MTA to hold **separate hearings** for LIRR and L.I. Bus fare and service issues (*MTR* #402) in Nassau, though the MTA refused the request. Even some L.I. transportation beat reporters tend to be largely unaware that L.I. Bus exists. The Senator argued that coverage of the hearings would tend to ignore the many problems facing L.I. Bus. Newspaper coverage last week **proved him correct**.

In testimony, Tri-State staffer Michelle DiChiara said, "The MTA should not ask bus riders to pay more without taking steps to **renegotiate its deal with Nassau County** to finance LI Bus. Riders should no longer be caught in the middle of an annual game of chicken played between the county, the state and the MTA over who is going to pay for bus operations.

"[County cuts to L.I. Bus have] continued this year, with the county cutting another \$2 million from its contribution to Long Island Bus' operating budget. This latest cut ensures that higher fares will not pay for any increase in service. Instead, bus riders are being asked to balance the county budget, and will be paying more for the same crowded and infrequent bus service as before."

planners working on initial phases of the Second Avenue Subway project have been considering First and Second Avenue express bus lanes since as early as 1996. The Bloomberg Administration has had ample time to review or revise these plans to announce something concrete.

The main area of **promises reconsidered** is the institutional administration of transportation. During the campaign, the mayor called for NYC Transit to be brought under city control. Now, under budget duress, the city is seeking to hand off the transit services it runs to the MTA. One passage notes, "the City is now considering transferring/selling its own properties (bridges) to the MTA." The mayor says he has also reconsidered the consolidation of transportation planning and law enforcement under one "traffic czar." The report argues instead that the present division of labor between the NYPD and city DOT "makes more sense," but leaves the matter open for future evaluation.

Pedestrians Needlessly Exposed on Medians, Says T.A.

In response to the recent carnage on Brooklyn's Atlantic Avenue, **Transportation Alternatives** has asked NYC transportation commissioner Iris Weinshall to immediately begin installing protective measures on the medians of major city boulevards.

On Feb. 5, an out-of-control driver sped along the Atlantic Ave median, killing two mothers and two infants standing in the median at an intersection.

In a letter to the commissioner sent last week, Transportation Alternatives asked NYC DOT to prevent future pedestrian injuries and deaths by installing inexpensive, **car-stopping devices like bollards or heavy planters** along major streets. The group also urged the enlargement of pedestrian waiting areas to a minimum of six feet. T.A. estimates from state data that up to 250 pedestrians waiting in medians are struck by vehicles each year.

"If that median strip had bollards or a concrete wall on it, the young women and their babies would have been unharmed," wrote John Kaehny, Transportation Alternatives executive director.

T.A. estimates that heavy-duty bollards would cost about \$15,000 per intersection. It said federal funds from sources like the Surface Transportation Program safety set-aside are available for such measures.

In response to consistently high pedestrian fatalities and injuries on Queens Blvd, city DOT and NYPD implemented a package of safety measures in recent years. They have reduced car-pedestrian crashes, though there were still three pedestrian deaths there last year.

The Tri-State Transportation Campaign web site:

www.tstc.org

Community Rejects Suffolk Road Expansion

All but two of dozens of citizens testifying on Suffolk County's plan to **add lanes to Portion Road** (Suffolk Route 16) in Lake Ronkonkoma and Farmingville said widening the road was a bad idea that would hurt the affected communities.

About 100 people attended the county hearing, held last Tuesday. 45 people testified. No elected officials attended, although an aide to Assemblyman Steve Levy's office — a prospective candidate for county executive — was present. Residents and civic leaders said the plan to widen the road from two to five lanes would "decrease quality of life" and make the community "noisier," "dirty" and "more dangerous."

The CR 16 Committee, a group of citizens opposing the county plan, and the Tri-State Transportation Campaign have urged Suffolk County Executive Robert Gaffney to stop the widening and re-open the planning process. The groups want outside consultants to develop a more holistic plan for the corridor that takes community aspirations and development priorities into account. The county's plan is based only the perceived need to alleviate short daily periods of traffic congestion.

The CR16 Committee proposes a concept applying "main street" road designs and **limited capacity improvements at intersections**. The says that the existing project is a waste of transportation resources because it will increase sprawl and traffic, worsen traffic related-fatalities, and discourage development in the corridor.

Even though County Executive Gaffney said in a recent letter to widening foes that **"no final decisions [on the road expansion] have been made,"** many who attended the hearing said they were worried that their concerns were falling on deaf ears.

New Brunswick Bikeway Revisited

In *MTR #400*, we stated that the George Street bikeway project in New Brunswick was stalled.

But according to Jack Molenaar, a Plainsboro official who recently worked for the RBA Group, the project has been broadened into the **"New Brunswick Bikeway Study."** The RBA Group is a consultant for many bike/ped projects in the region

The New Brunswick Bikeway study will focus on a larger area — analyzing the area bordered by Sudan Street, the Raritan river, and the Cook-Douglas campuses — and will include a series of connective bike routes, rather than the single George St. lane. The project has been included in 2003 North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority project lists, and has been allocated \$350,000 in federal funds for scoping and NEPA-related costs.

MTR#403 Contributing: Danielle Burger, Michelle DiChiara

240 West 35th Street #801, New York, NY 10001

CALENDAR

February 18, 6pm, Transforming Transit: A NY Metro APA Event, Co-Sponsored by MAS and CIUS, Urban Center, 457 Madison Ave, 212-228-7875

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

February 19, 7pm, BQE Reconstruction Public Information Meeting, 69-01 34th Ave, 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 20, noon, Metro North Railroad Commuter Council meeting, 347 Madison Ave, 10th floor, 212-878-7087, www.pcac.org

February 20, noon, Long Island Railroad Commuter's Council meeting, 347 Madison Ave, 5th floor, 212-878-7087, www.pcac.org

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

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.

March 5-7, League of American Bicyclists Bike Summit, Washington D.C., www.bikeleague.org 202-822-1333.

MTA FARE HIKE HEARINGS

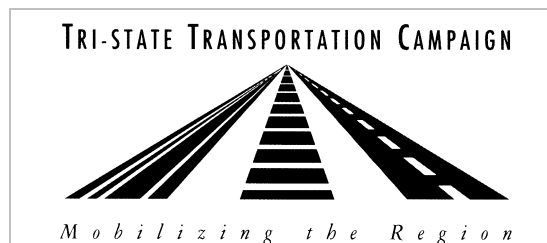
For more information call 212-878-7483.

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



Editors: Jon Orcutt, Kate Slevin Executive Director, Janine Bauer

tel. (212) 268-7474 fax (212) 268-7333 tstc@tstc.org