

Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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NEWS

Report Studies Who Will Pay for E. River Tolls

The Bridge Tolls Advocacy Project released a report this week that examines who will pay if East River bridges are tolled. Findings from the report indicate that less than 2% of people over 18 would pay more than \$50 a year in East River tolls.

The few who will pay dearly for the tolls would be those drivers who commute over the bridges daily, who would pay tolls reaching \$1,500 a year.

According to the study, NYC residents would pay 78% of the toll revenue, Long Islanders 18% of the total, and New Jerseyans 4% of the total. Assuming an adjusted average toll of \$3.72, New Jersey and Long Island drivers would pay about \$160 million, more than a third of the revenue NYC lost with the repeal of the commuter tax in 1999.

While the report does indicate that Brooklyn residents would pay the highest percentages of the tolls, combined with other budget balancing measures, such as the new hefty real estate tax in Manhattan, the tolls would actually more evenly distribute the city's budget woes amongst the boroughs.

The report was not the only new development this week in the East River toll battle. A Point-Counterpoint in the *Daily News* on Thursday pitted Brooklyn Borough President Marty Markowitz against economist Charles Komanoff, head of the Bridge Tolls Advocacy Project and author of the above mentioned report.

Markowitz has continually argued that the tolls would disproportionately affect Brooklyn's "working stiffs" and in the *News*, called for a modest tax increase on "high-income households." But don't user fees, E. River tolls, accomplish just that? Only 2% of BK and Queens residents would pay more than \$50 a year on tolls. This is most likely the same 2% that can afford to pay for parking and all the other expenses associated with driving a car daily in NYC. *

MTA Raises Fares, Approves Antiquated Toll Plan

The MTA Board voted on Thursday to raise fares on NYC Transit to \$2, increase LIRR and Metro-North Rail fares by 25%, and close 62 token booths. Only one MTA Board Member, Albert Andrews (a non-voting member of the Board, representing the NYC Riders Council), stated his opposition to the fare increase. The MTA also

FY 04 NJ DOT Capital Program Much Smarter

Although things probably couldn't get worse than last year, New Jersey DOT's capital program managers claim they are finally "turning the ship," and paying heed to the Tri-State Transportation Campaign's call for higher levels of funding for "fix it first" projects. Governor McGreevey also has liberally used the "fix it first" phrase in characterizing his smart growth goals, but last year's capital program did nothing to instill confidence that it would be achieved.

This year, things are different. The state Transportation Trust Fund portion of the capital program doubles the amount of money devoted to fixing deteriorated bridges (from \$21 million to over \$50 million), and increases funding for road preservation projects from \$78 million to \$110 million. Though these are comparable to the levels of funding when the "fix it first" mandate was enshrined in the Trust Fund Renewal Law in 2000, any progress is remarkable in a tight budget year when all discretionary transportation funds (e.g. toll monies) are being used for General Fund purposes.

Local Aid and intermodal funding levels are held constant in FY 2004; funds for new highway capacity projects drop from \$62 million last year (not counting a few misclassified projects) to the lowest level ever—just \$2.5 million. The combined federal and state portion to be devoted to new highway capacity is under 5% in the scheduled capital program for FY 2004. Transit advocates are satisfied.

Additionally, the Hillsborough Bypass project was delayed due to NJ DOT's insistence that interchanges be removed from a design that would have promoted sprawl.

More significantly, the draft EIS for the Flemington Bypass (Rt. 31 in Hunterdon County) was rejected at the last minute by DOT Comm. Jack Lettiere for failing to consider smart growth and land use—and sent back to the drawing board.

Construction funds overall are up however, with an additional \$30 million in the DOT program-- \$610 million compared to last year's \$580 million. Debt service is still a problem, as is the need for additional dedicated funding, plus more than \$200 million spent on capital program "delivery and support." These problems will be tackled later this year. *

NJ "Safety First" Program Limited

Governor McGreevey's Highway Safety Task Force released its twelve-point "Safety First" program this week. Although the program was created in response to a string of tractor-trailer crashes that killed three people and shut down I-78, I-80, and I-287 on the same day last November, it falls short of fully addressing the dangers large trucks pose to NJ drivers.

Several of the program's provisions – including increased truck inspections and investment in roadway safety features – echo elements of the twelve-point truck safety platform submitted by the Tri-State Campaign, local elected officials, and other groups to State DOT Commissioner Jack Lettiere in January. Other Campaign topics of concern, such as incident management, signage, and the safety incentives for truck drivers and fleet owners, also found their way into the "Safety First" program.

But the "Safety First" program does not go far enough to improve highway truck safety. The Campaign's platform – also endorsed by The New Jersey Police Traffic Officers Association and thirteen mayors – calls for extending the current truck route restrictions for all tractor trailers as well as those trucks making in-state trips. It also calls for restoring the authority of municipal and county police to conduct truck roadside inspections. "Safety First" omits these measures, which would remove a substantial number of dangerous trucks from more local highways.

Instead, several measures in the Governor's program focus on New Jersey drivers. These include increased driver education on truck-car interaction, and the doubling of fines for speeding on designated corridors. An editorial in *The Star-Ledger* questioned the effectiveness of raising fines, saying out of the entire plan, higher fines were the "least likely to accomplish anything."

Further, as *The Trenton Times* pointed out, Governor McGreevey's record in persuading the Legislature to enact highway safety measures is "somewhat flawed." Currently, a bill to forbid motorists from using hand-held cell phones remains on hold.

The "Safety First" program was developed by a Highway Safety Task Force, appointed by the Governor, that is to become a permanent entity. Members were appointed last November by the Governor and include the DOT, State Police, the AAA, the New Jersey Motor Truck Association, and the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration. *

The Tri-State Transportation Campaign web site:

www.tstc.org

voted for a 50-cent flat toll hike on its bridges and tunnels, missing a perfect opportunity to implement congestion pricing.

Those attending any of the 10 public hearings or Thursday's MTA Board meeting would have noticed that public outcry was mainly focused on the fare increase and station booth closings. Yet, throughout the process, the MTA toll plan has largely escaped notice.

When the subject of tolls was broached at yesterday's Board meeting, a few MTA officials – seeming to realize the disparity for the first time – did question Chairman Kalikow as to why bridge and tunnel tolls were increasing by 14%, while subway and bus fares were increasing by up to 33%, .

Kalikow's response? He didn't want to "stick it to the drivers." He claimed that the transit system could not handle an influx of drivers who might switch to mass transit if tolls prices were too high. And Finance Director Gary Caplan justified the inequity by noting that bridge and tunnel tolls have increased by 3.5 times their 1980 levels, while transit fares have gone up only 2.6 times their 1980 levels.

However, a narrower look at just the past decade shows a very different story. Taking the most recent fare hike into account, since 1996 NYC transit riders have seen a 60% increase in the base fare (20% in 1996, 33% this year), while drivers have seen only a 33% hike (16% in 1996 and 14% this year). This year, the increased NYC Transit fares will produce \$723 million, the new rail fares \$177 million, and the higher tolls just over \$100 million.

The MTA still has time to revisit its antiquated toll plan. It should look to London, the Port Authority, and the NJ Turnpike Authority for guidance, all of whom have implemented congestion pricing and received reductions in congestion and pollution, as well as monetary savings for off-peak drivers.

Last month, the Tri-State Transportation Campaign released a report by Komanoff Energy Associates that indicated that the MTA could offer drivers off-peak discounts without sacrificing revenue. This report is available at www.tstc.org. *

Bee-Line Fares Increase

This was a bad week for transit riders throughout the region. Along with the MTA fare increase, base fares for Westchester's Bee-line bus system increased on Monday from \$1.40 to \$1.75.

Bee-line officials have said that the fares are expected to give Bee-line an additional \$4.7 million in farebox revenue, \$400,000 more than is needed to plug the Bee-line's \$4.3 million deficit. Transit advocates and local politicians have called for an independent audit of Bee-line, saying that their post fare hike declining ridership estimates are skewed, and that the fare increases may actually produce revenues far greater than \$4.7 million. *

Parking Investment Bad Sign for NJ Transit Villages

This is a two part story on NJ Transit Villages. Last week's story discussed NJ transit village funding allocations and called for NJDOT to put more money into the program. This section takes a look at what kind of development is going on in designated transit villages, and how that development can be effective in promoting transit village ideals.

Once a New Jersey transit village is designated as such, state funding allocated to the town is not necessarily consistent with transit village ideals. State funding allocations to transit villages, especially those from NJ Transit and NJDOT, should focus on transit village ideals and decrease car dependency. So far, much of NJDOT and NJ Transit funding is car-focused, and is not providing residents with alternative transportation methods. Take, for example, Rahway.

Last week, Rahway, a recently designated transit village, announced that, at a cost of \$8-9 million (\$3 million of which has already been approved from NJ Transit), it was going to build 570 parking spaces next to its transit station. The new five-level parking facility will replace an old facility that provided parking for 80-100 cars and take up much of the block across the street from its train station. 2700 daily commuters use the Rahway station per day and parking is frequently a problem at the station.

Part of the criteria to become a transit village is to "reduce parking requirements and encourage shared parking." One way to do that is to rezone for more residential density and mixed uses around the train station.

When residents can walk to the train, households can often do away with the second car—or any car. In South Orange, for example, a development one block from the train station has just one parking space per apartment - unheard of in suburbia- and a zoning density of 38 dwelling units/acre. A mixed-use project in the heart of Rahway will have 120 apartments; other projects close to Rahway's train station will bring a total of 186 townhomes and apartments plus 10,000 sq. ft. of retail space.

By locating housing, especially affordable housing, around train station and major bus routes, New Jersey could begin to solve both its affordable housing crisis and its traffic congestion problem. 1.2 million new NJ residents are expected in the next 20 years. To accommodate this population increase and simultaneously reduce congestion, transit ridership and capacity must be increased, and the number of cars per household must decline. Locating housing and jobs in cities and around suburban transit hubs is the only way to do that.

Incentives for developers can also help reduce parking near train and bus stations. For example, the City of

Ottawa has offered developers a 25 parking space reduction for every bus stop they build by a retail center.

In New Jersey, however, the urge to build more parking is strong, and counterproductive. For instance, Rahway is also building a five-story parking deck right across the street from the station. Rahway has the right idea—the new parking lot will liberate downtown land currently used for parking to be redeveloped for other uses—but why not reduce the number of new parking spaces and make other transportation options more attractive to commuters? It's unclear whether other alternatives were thoroughly explored—like jitneys, car pool programs, bike lanes and parking, or increased feeder bus service.

The Rahway parking deck is just the beginning of NJ DOT's enhanced investment in new parking spaces. In November 2002, NJ DOT announced its plan to create 20,000 parking spaces near bus and trains stations; that was enshrined in the executive order the governor issued creating the blue ribbon commission to study ways to enhance revenue for transport capital projects. A whopping \$200 million of New Jersey's long term capital budget is scheduled to be used for designing and building parking spaces. If NJ Transit or NJ state government held stock in parking firms that paid dividends, they might at least reap some benefit from this partnership. But spending precious capital dollars for the storage of vehicles on valuable land that could be put to economically productive uses is a waste of taxpayer money.

This year alone, \$13 million of NJT's capital fund (thirteen times the entire annual allocation for transit villages) is designated for the design and construction of parking spaces. 840 spaces are to be constructed and 3,300 more designed by 2004.

Though the McGreevey Administration continues to hail added parking spaces are part of its smart growth initiative to bring new riders to train and bus stations, NJ Transit rider research from the mid-1990s found that increasing the number of parking spaces did not bring a commensurate number of new riders. The research revealed that more often these same riders were existing passengers who previously got to the train station another way, like walking, biking, car-pooling, being dropped off or taking a bus or jitney. The new parking spaces just encouraged existing riders to drive, rather than get to the station in a smarter, more efficient manner.

Increased parking around train stations also increase peak hour congestion and pollution on local streets, which runs counter to transit village ideals.

New Jersey should look to other transit villages

throughout North America that have come up with more sustainable methods of dealing with parking. The Fruitvale Transit Village in Oakland, CA, redeveloped the giant parking lots next to its BART station into commercial and residential complexes. Although its final transit village design will also include a parking deck, it is at least a block from the station. Station-adjacent areas will be used for residential and commercial uses. Fruitvale is even considering banning cars from some of its main streets next to its train station, so it can beautify its streets and improve pedestrian accessibility.

Increased bus and feeder service, carpooling, jitneys, and bike paths are more effective and cheaper methods of relieving traffic than increased parking, which adds to street congestion. These modes also tend to reduce localized air pollution. Ottawa's reductions in station parking and increases in express bus and feeder services have been successful in reducing car traffic in the city. Ottawa has received widespread recognition for its successful bus-based transit system which has reduced the total number of cars on the road. It is estimated that 3 out of every 4 peak hour weekday trips to downtown are by transit.

NJ Transit Villages are possible. It's time for NJDOT to increase funding for the transit village program, and ensure that state funding allocations and policies conform with the ideals of the transit village. This program, with a few modifications, could be an innovative step, emulated by many other states. Gov. McGreevey's agencies have to raise the bar for smart growth well beyond building more parking at trains stations. *

NYS TEA-21 Reauthorization Update

At Governor Pataki's request, former New York State Assembly Minority leader John Faso will head an initiative to protect New York State's interests in the upcoming reauthorization of the Transportation Equity Act of 21st Century (TEA- 21) bill.

The Governor will likely request funding for East Side Access, the 2nd Avenue Subway, and the Tappan Zee Bridge. Both Governor Pataki and President Bush have voiced their support of the East Side Access project. Other projects that need to be prioritized include the cross harbor freight tunnel, LIRR Main Line third track, Lower Manhattan improvements, and new passenger rail tunnel under the Hudson River. *



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Calendar

March 11 (rescheduled), 7pm, NYS DOT BQE Reconstruction public information meeting, White Castle District Headquarters, 75th St and 30th Ave, 718-424-4157, cruyle@gw.dot.state.ny.us

March 13, Sierra Club NJ, "Future of the Meadowlands," Flat Rock Brook Nature Center, 443 Van Nostrand Ave, Engelwood, NJ, BetsyKohn@aol.com, 201-461-4534

March 18, 4pm, Sheridan Expressway Scoping Hearing, Hunts Point Library, 877 Southern Blvd and Tiffany St., Bronx (212)-799-8803 ext. 22, (718) 482-4526

March 20, 4pm, Sheridan Expressway Scoping Hearing, Bronx Borough Board Meeting Room, 198 East 161st St., (212)-799-8803 ext. 22, (718) 482-4526

March 17- 21, Towards Car Free Cities, Hosted by Car Busters, Prague, Czech Republic, www.carbusters.org/conference

March 21, Citizens Union meeting, "Planning, Process, and Politics: Rebuilding After 9/11," Sky Club, Met Life Building, 200 Park Ave, 212-277-0342, citizens@citizensunion.org

March 24, 5:30 PM Rutgers Voorhees Transportation Center's "Federal Transportation Policy, Bicycling, and Public Health," James L. Oberstar, Congressman from Minnesota. School of Planning and Public Policy, 33 Livingston Ave., New Brunswick, NJ. 732-932-6812 x700 or cdanku@rci.rutgers.edu

March 25, 10am, Metropolitan Mobility Network, United States Environmental Protection Agency, 290 Broadway, Room 27D, New York, 718-472-3029, jkhan@dot.state.ny.us

March 25, 6-8, Auto-Free NY Meeting, "Towards an Auto-Free Governor's Island," Robert Pirani, Regional Plan Association, 212-475-3394, www.auto-free.org

April 2, 9am, "Moving Transportation in the Right Direction," Annual public hearing sponsored NJ Clean Air Council. NJ DEP Public Hearing Room, 401 East State Street in Trenton, (609)-633-0530 <http://www.state.nj.us/dep/cleanair.html>

April 7-9, TransAction 2003: New Jersey's state-wide transportation extravaganza. Atlantic City, NJ. <http://www.njcost.com/transaction.htm>

more calendar entries at www.tstc.org