

Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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NEWS

MTA, Employers Could Ease Fare Woes

The TransitChek program could save commuters hundreds of dollars a year, but so far, it has not been used to its potential. TransitChek officials told the *Daily News* this week that only 500,000 employees, less than 10% of those that use MTA facilities daily, are able to take advantage of the TransitChek program. The program is a rare gift from the federal government to **transit-rich New York.**

At no cost to the MTA or the state, the TransitChek program, a part of **federal tax law**, allows employees to use up to \$100 per month (\$1,200 per year) in pre-tax income to purchase transit fares. With a base salary of \$48,000, this can translate into employee savings of up to \$400 a year. Andy Darrell, regional director of Environmental Defense, discussed the benefits of the program in a *Daily News* op-ed this week, arguing, "The cost of a fare hike doesn't have to come straight from riders' pockets.... For many New Yorkers [TransitChek benefits] could **wipe out the impact of the fare increase.**"

For example, with the recent MTA fare hikes, a monthly MetroCard will increase in price from \$63 to \$70 per month, a weekly card from \$17 to \$21. Annually, people using monthly MetroCards will be paying \$84 more than before, while those using weeklies will be paying \$208 more a year in fares.

But with TransitChek, a commuter making \$48,000 a year using a monthly or weekly card can save about \$300 a year (a little more with a weekly, a little less with a monthly card), offsetting higher fares.

The trouble with TransitChek is that individuals can't sign up directly — an employer has to participate in the program. To win more participation, the MTA and other agencies need to **promote the benefit more vigorously.** The public sector has done a decent job of offering the benefit to its workforce. NYC employees have access to a special annual TransitChek MetroCard, and Westchester county offers TransitChek.

More **backing from business leaders** could also go a long way. In CT, on March 25, the Business Council of Southwestern CT and transportation agencies are holding a forum to promote the Deduct-A-Ride program. A few similar promotional endeavors in NYC could provide the TransitChek program the exposure it deserves. *

Long Live the \$2 Fare ?

Transit labor leaders and advocates for bus and subway riders warn that the \$2 city transit fare approved recently by the MTA may not last beyond 2004. They argue that **escalating MTA debt service costs**, spending on system expansion projects and a new labor contract will all come due in 2005, heavily pressuring transit finances.

The case is similar to that expressed here in January (*MTR #399*), which spelled out concern that MTA pronouncements about its budget made no mention of the period beyond 2004. One very worrisome implication of rising debt service costs and the city's and state's increasing abdication from supporting transit with revenues other than higher fares is whether fare increases will again become a common occurrence in the lives of straphangers. *

A recent history of the NYC Transit fare

Four fare increases, 1980-1984:

- * 1980: from 50¢ to 60¢
- * 1981: from 60¢ to 75¢
- * 1983: from 75¢ to 90¢
- * 1984: from 90¢ to \$1.00

Three fare increases, 1990-1995:

- * 1990: from \$1.00 to \$1.15
- * 1992: from \$1.15 to \$1.25
- * 1995: from \$1.25 to \$1.50

Huge Jump in NJ Pedestrian Deaths

Statistics provided to the Tri-State Transportation Campaign by the New Jersey Dept. of Law and Public Safety show a **26 percent increase in New Jersey pedestrian fatalities** from 2001 to 2002. 182 pedestrians were killed in traffic crashes during 2002, up from 134 during 2001.

The startling increase reverses a promising downward trend in New Jersey pedestrian fatalities begun in the mid-1990s. From 1996 to 2001, pedestrian deaths in the state declined by an average of seven percent per year. The 2002 numbers bring New Jersey's pedestrian death toll to its **highest level since 1996**, when 183 pedestrians were killed.

Dept. of Law and Public Safety officials cautioned that the 2002 data are still preliminary. However, traffic fatality data revisions tend to increase, rather than reduce, annual totals.

Total NJ traffic fatalities increased as well, from 745 in 2001 to 786 in 2002, a 5.2 percent increase. Overall traffic deaths in New Jersey have been rising steadily since 1999, after declining through much the 1990s. The numbers bring **pedestrians' share of traffic deaths** in the state to **23%**, the highest rate since 1993. On the other hand, bicyclist and motorcyclist deaths in the state were down significantly from 2001-2002.

The Tri-State Campaign has not yet discussed likely causes of the increase with New Jersey officials, but it may suggest that traffic calming, pedestrian infrastructure improvements and traffic law enforcement are not keeping pace with dangerous driving and the erosion of the pedestrian environment in much of the state.

Among NJ counties, **suburban Bergen and Middlesex had the most pedestrian deaths** in 2002, with 25 and 23, respectively. These are large increases over respective 2001 totals of 13 and 9 in 2001. The counties' 2001 numbers were low, however, compared to their pedestrian fatality levels during the 1990s. Essex and Union Counties each saw 17 pedestrians killed during 2002. Burlington and Essex Counties each saw 65 total traffic deaths in 2002, the highest totals among all counties.*

Rowland Proposes Fare Hikes

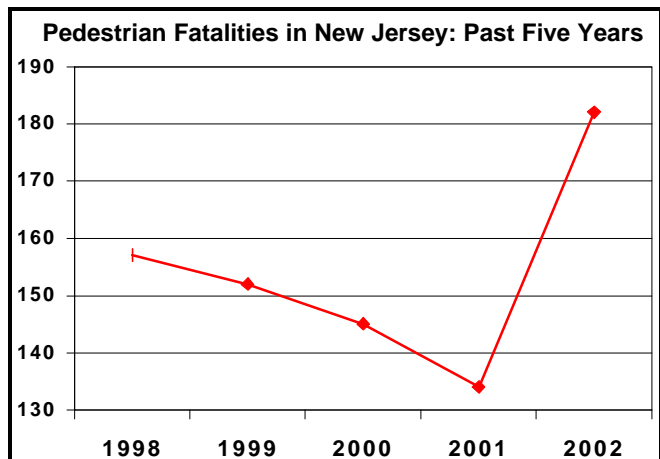
The executive budget issued by Governor Rowland during the first week of March proposes 25% bus fare increases and a 20% commuter rail fare hike. The governor proposes to raise the rail fares on October 1 this year, and bus fares on January 1, 2004.

Rowland's budget documents argue that bus fares have not been raised since 1995, and that rail fares have been steady since 1998. However, bus riders have seen **service cuts** in recent years. The proposed budget apparently does not call for further cuts.

The executive budget explicitly argued the case for fare increases: "Some would argue that raising mass transit fees is counter to the idea of increasing ridership. The fact is, costs in mass transportation and elsewhere are going up substantially. There is nothing inconsistent with asking riders to pay a fair share of the operating cost increase over time." The document said state subsidies for transit would continue to increase, though the fare hike will likely **alter the shares** of transit operating budgets **paid for by riders and the state**.

The fare hike plans were criticized by **lawmakers from Fairfield County**, which is choking on traffic congestion. State House Speaker Moira Lyons said hikes would counter efforts to build stronger transit ridership in southwestern CT. Others predicted the fare hike plan would be one of the sticking points in budget negotiations this year.

The governor's budget did not act on the set of recommendations proposed by CT's Transportation Strategy Board. The budget's transportation provisions look more like a continuation of ConnDOT priorities.*



Ban Car Alarms !

Transportation Alternatives released a report this week that documented what most people know — that car alarms are far **better at annoying and keeping awake** NYC residents than they are in preventing car thefts. The study suggests affordable, effective alternatives to car alarms, such as brake locks and personal pager car alarms.

The study, "Alarmingly Useless: The Case for Banning Car Alarms in NYC," uses NYC insurance claim data, hundreds of responses to an online poll, and other data to assess the effectiveness of car alarms, and their status as a public enemy.

T.A.'s online survey overwhelmingly demonstrated that car alarms are a **negative, widely hated phenomenon**. 91% of respondents said car alarms reduced quality of life, and 76% said car alarms keep them awake at night. The online survey also found that only 5% of the respondents have responded to the sound of an alarm by calling the police about a possible theft, while a whopping 60% have called cops to complain about car alarm noise.

At the same time, car alarms are not effective in preventing thefts. 95-99% of all alarms are false, and **cars with alarms are just as likely to be broken into** those without. Alarms do so little to halt thefts that insurance companies are pulling back discounts they once offered to car owners with alarms, T.A.'s Aaron Naparstek told the *Daily News*.

Transportation Alternatives concludes that the psychological and economic damage of these alarms may cost New Yorkers up to \$400-\$500 million a year in public health costs, decreased property values, lost productivity, and diminished quality of life.

"Everyone hates car alarms but no one has been doing anything," said T.A. director John Kaehny. "We want to get rid of these things once and for all."

Last spring, **City Councilmember John Liu** introduced a bill that, if enacted, would ban the sale and installation of car alarms in NYC. T.A. is looking to change that legislation so it would provide an outright

ban of car alarms in NYC. The group is also calling on Speaker Gifford Miller to introduce legislation in City Council that will completely ban car alarms in the five boroughs. It also wants Mayor Bloomberg to incorporate the alarm ban into his **Operation Silent Night** campaign, begun in October of 2002.

It's unclear why **Liu's bill has languished** in the Council for nearly a year. It is up to the Council's Committee on Environmental Protection, headed by Queens' James Gennaro, to schedule a hearing on the matter. Anti-alarm activists say the committee has told them it is busy. On March 26, the committee is scheduled to take up the issue of amending the city's administrative code, "in relation to the purchase of re-refined motor oil by city agencies for use in city vehicles."

Council members would probably find a lot more

Sheridan Project Begins New Phase

With Environmental Impact Statement scoping hearings for the Sheridan Expressway set to begin, it's do or die time for the New York State Dept. of Transportation to agree to study an alternate, community-generated plan for the highway and surrounding neighborhood. Local community-based organizations and regional transportation watchdog groups have been pushing DOT for years to study their plan, dubbed the '**Community Alternative**,' alongside other expensive and complicated alternatives, including the complete reconstruction of the Bruckner-Sheridan interchange.

In scoping documents released earlier this week, NYS-DOT outlined some of the possible alternatives for the project, including each of the three major elements of the Community Alternative – **demapping the Sheridan Expressway** (freeing up 28 acres of open space), constructing new ramps off the Bruckner Expressway at Leggett Avenue (easing access into Hunts Point Market), and elevating portions of the Bruckner Expressway (increasing safety for both drivers and pedestrians). Acknowledging all the components of the Community Alternative is a huge step forward for DOT who have previously resisted elements of the proposal, most notably the decommissioning of the Sheridan.

DOT now has one major step left – agreeing to study all three pieces as a **single alternative**, and not simply elements of other alternatives. The Community Alternative's inclusion in the EIS process has the support of numerous community organizations and politicians, including State Senator Diaz, State Assemblyman Diaz, Councilman Serrano, and Bronx Borough Pres. Carrion.

Public scoping meetings for the Bruckner-Sheridan project will be held in the Bronx on March 18 from 5-9 p.m. at the Hunts Point Library and March 20 from 5-9 p.m. at the Bronx Borough Board Briefing Room (see Calendar for more). DOT's draft scoping documents for the project can be found at: www.dot.state.ny.us/reg/r11/bese/scoping/dbrifdoc.html. *

public interest in banning car alarms. Last Thursday, psychology Professor Harold Takooshian of Fordham University organized a conference on banning car alarms. Dozens attended, with the overwhelming majority in favor of the ban.

To read the T.A. report and send a letter to Speaker Miller supporting a car alarm ban, log onto www.BanCarAlarms.org. *

Ferries a Cheaper Route for Downtown

The report issued last week by Schaller Consulting on Lower Manhattan transportation improvements questioned the downtown business community's fixation with building a new LIRR link.

Schaller's research found that not only is improving commuter travel from the **Metro-North service area** to downtown more important than a wildly expensive LIRR project, but that much less capital-intensive non-rail transit options could serve in this role. Travelers from the Metro-North area generally face longer commute times to Lower Manhattan than those from Long Island.

Data compiled in the report points out that rail accounts for only 44% of suburban commuting to Manhattan. Express bus service makes up another 20%.

Well-planned ferry services could reduce travel times from the Metro-North area to downtown. However, these would have to overcome **local issues** such as access and parking at ferry sites, and **competition** from relatively heavily subsidized commuter rail service. The Glen Cove high speed ferry, which connected Nassau County's north shore to downtown Manhattan, was recently discontinued. Schaller attributes its demise to high fares. Glen Cove is served by the LIRR Oyster Bay line.

Successful commuter ferries to Lower Manhattan, like those from the Highlands and Atlantic Highlands area, compete with the fairly slow North Jersey Coast rail line. Another recent ferry success — the Haverstraw-Ossining service — complements commuter rail by delivering west-of-Hudson commuters to arriving Metro-North trains.

Essentially, the issue comes down to public policy — can **operating resources** be directed to new ferry services that would allow fares to become attractive to a broader commuting audience?

Additionally, Schaller identifies the competitive advantage Midtown has over Lower Manhattan in bus commuting from New Jersey, thanks to the Lincoln Tunnel exclusive bus lane and the Port Authority bus terminal. The paper acknowledges that expanding New Jersey bus access to downtown will be difficult, and discusses the possibility of linking commuter buses to PATH stations that serve Lower Manhattan. How-

ever, if the recent debates over possible uses of the Bergen Arches corridor are any indication (see *MTR* #389), directing significant numbers of buses to the Hudson County waterfront is likely to provoke a major community reaction. At the very least, the current Holland Tunnel restrictions on commercial traffic should be kept in place to ease commuter travel from NJ into the downtown area. To read Schaller's report, see www.schallerconsult.com. *

Authority Adopts Better Bike/Ped Rule

Hudson Valley bike advocates report that the **NY State Bridge Authority** has changed its policy of banning cyclists and pedestrians from its cross-Hudson bridges during national "orange alerts" for terrorism (see *MTR* #405). The Bridge Authority will now only prohibit cycling and walking during "red alerts," the highest stage of national alert. Reportedly, the authority's bridges would be closed to all traffic – including cars and trucks – during red alerts. We commend the Bridge Authority for this sensible action. Other NY agencies operating bridges have not barred cyclists and pedestrians from crossing during past orange alerts or during the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks. *

NJDOT Finds Interchange Would Generate Additional Traffic

In Bedminster, NJ, a "Citizens Group Against the Ramps" won a victory last week when NJDOT decided to forego its plan to build an **interchange** between interstates 287 and 78 and Route 202-206. Rather than construct the \$50 million interchange, NJDOT has decided to implement local improvements around existing exits to relieve congestion in the area.

The final decision came at a meeting with NJDOT's Citizen Advisory Committee last week, where final results of a traffic study from the project were made available. The results indicated that the **planned interchange would increase traffic** on local roads around the project, rather than reduce it. With this data, NJDOT decided to drop the project. *

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



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The Tri-State Transportation Campaign web site:

www.tstc.org

Calendar

March 18, 4pm, Bruckner/Sheridan Interchange Expressway Scoping Hearing, Hunts Point Library, Southern Blvd and Tiffany St., Bronx. 718-482-4526.

March 19, 7pm, Metro-North/Shore Line East Commuter Council. New Haven rail station. Discussion of Gov. Rowland's proposed transit fare increases. www.trainweb.org/ct,

March 20, 4pm, Bruckner/Sheridan Expressway Scoping Hearing, Bronx Borough President's Office, 198 Grand Concourse at 161st St., Bronx. 718-482-4526.

March 20, 11am, NYMTC Annual Council Meeting at the U.S. Custom House Auditorium. One Bowling Green, Manhattan. 718-472-3293 or AMiles-Cole@dot.state.ny.us, www.nymtc.org.

March 21, 8am, Citizens Union: "Planning, Process and Politics: Rebuilding After 9/11," Sky Club, 200 Park Avenue, Manhattan. citizens@citizensunion.org, 212-227-0342.

March 24, 5:30 pm, "Federal Transportation Policy, Bicycling, and Public Health." Congressman James L. Oberstar. Sponsored by Bloustein School, Voorhees Transportation Center, Rutgers Univ., 33 Livingston Street, New Brunswick. 732-932-6812, ext. 700 or danku@rci.rutgers.edu.

March 25, 6-8, Auto-Free NY Meeting: "Towards an Auto-Free Governor's Island," Robert Pirani, Regional Plan Association. 104 Washington St., Manhattan. 212-475-3394, www.auto-free.org.

April 1, 4:30pm, PCAC President's Forum with Metro-North RR President Peter Cannito. 347 Madison Ave, 5th Floor, Manhattan. mail@pcac.org, 212-878-7087.

April 2, 9am, "Moving Transportation in the Right Direction," Annual public hearing sponsored by 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. www.njcost.com/transaction.htm

April 25, 8am, RPA's 13th Annual Regional Assembly, "Shaping the Region for the 21st Century." Marriott Marquis, Manhattan. www.rpa.org, 212-253-2727

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

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