

Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

Number 408

March 24, 2003

NEWS

Suozzi Backs LIRR Third Track

— Appears to Call for Changes in DOT Plan —

Lending substance to an otherwise pro-forma NY Metropolitan Transportation Council annual meeting, County Executive Thomas Suozzi presented his vision for transportation in Nassau County last Thursday.

The most concrete elements in the presentation were a call for construction of a third track along the Long Island Railroad's Main Line, roughly between Jamaica and Hicksville, backing for rail **freight yard development** at the Pilgrim hospital site and transferring the county's financial responsibility for **Long Island Bus** to the MTA.

Suozzi said the county is proceeding with its **Nassau Hub** major investment study, which is expected to examine a variety of mass transit strategies in conjunction with in-fill development in the area around Mineola, Garden City and Eisenhower Park.

Suozzi also said he wanted to work with the NY State DOT to **"complete" the LITP 2000 plan**, but that the plan would need to give more emphasis to local connections in order to give Nassau residents more options for using transit within the county and within Long Island. The LITP plan calls primarily for construction of a network of new HOV lanes — mainly on highways in Nassau County — and for many other standard highway widening projects across Long Island. Suozzi's remarks were too vague for a determination of where he stands regarding the highway projects or what his "local connections" emphasis would actually entail.

However, Suozzi said he was interested in finding aspects of LITP that he, the State DOT and critics of LITP's highway elements could agree to move forward on. He implied that he had met with state transportation commissioner Joseph Boardman prior to the NYMTC meeting.

The County Executive's position on the LIRR third track is important because some state legislators from Nassau have poured cold water on the project. The project is needed for a variety of LIRR service improvements. At present, peak period demand on the Main Line means service can only run in one direction during a critical commuting window. That limits the railroad's utility for trips other than the standard suburb-Manhattan commute. ❖

Outpouring of Support for Removal of South Bronx Highway

At public "scoping" meetings for NY State DOT's Bruckner-Sheridan interchange project last week, scores of civic leaders, residents and young people called for consideration of a project alternative that would **remove the Sheridan Expressway**. The plan would also establish a new truck access route from the highway network to the Hunts Point Market area and improve pedestrian access and safety at Hunts Point's gateway where Hunts Point Avenue intersects with Bruckner Boulevard.

The community proposal has been developed by an alliance of Bronx and city-wide groups comprised of Sustainable South Bronx, Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice, the NYC Environmental Justice Alliance, Pratt Institute's Center for Community and Environmental Development and the Tri-State Campaign. It proposes a **new entrance/exit for the Bruckner Expressway** at Leggett Avenue. That would create a convenient route between the Bronx highway network and the Hunts Point markets.

The new truck route would permit the demapping of the 1.25 mile Sheridan Expressway in favor of riverfront parkland or other uses. The Sheridan is essentially a minor connector road between the Cross-Bronx and Bruckner Expressways, which intersect at two other points, and are also linked by the Bronx River Parkway. The Sheridan — just a mile and a quarter long — sees very little overall traffic volume by NYC standards. Eliminating the Sheridan would also remove its interchanges with the Bruckner and Cross-Bronx, **eliminating major causes of congestion** along both highways. Removal of the Bruckner-Sheridan interchange would also permit the Bruckner to be elevated from Hunts Point Avenue to Colgate Avenue, which would open up additional access to the Bronx River waterfront and improve pedestrian access between Hunts Point and the rest of the South Bronx. The Bruckner presently descends to grade in the area.

Over one hundred people turned out for Tuesday's hearing at the Hunts Point library. Testimony unanimously called for a strong look at the community alternative. Many speakers reiterated that South Bronx neighborhoods are surrounded by interstate highways, and that asthma rates in the area are extreme.

Speakers also noted the absence of sufficient open space and greenery in the area, and the relatively light use of the Sheridan. The event was spirited, with frequent applause for neighborhood leaders and other supporters of the community plan, and signs with slogans like "Exit at Leggett."

Anthony Winn of Youth Ministries said agreement on a set of projects mutually acceptable to the DOT and community groups would **hasten construction and improvement**, whereas local opposition could result in years of delay and conflict.

Danielle Burger of the Tri-State Campaign said the community plan would **fulfill the DOT's project goals** to improve safety, mobility and the environment better than the plans originally advanced by the DOT itself. She noted several initiatives by cities outside the metropolitan region to reclaim urban land by tearing down useful highways.

Vincent Pacifico, an employer at the Hunts Point meat market, said he supports improvements to the area like removing the Sheridan, and said an access plan like the Bruckner-Leggett ramps made sense.

Community testimony was backed at another hearing on Thursday, where State Assembly member Ruben Diaz Jr. said he wanted NY State DOT to take a robust look at the Sheridan demapping plan, and a representative of Borough President Adolfo Carrion urged the DOT to listen to the community.

The DOT's concept for the Bruckner-Sheridan connection is to upgrade the interchange ramps to provide smoother and safer traffic flow, and to provide better access for trucks from the Sheridan into the Hunts Point district, which features New York City's primary wholesale food market. However, the **new complex of ramps** the DOT envisions will further cut Hunts Point off from the rest of the Bronx. Moreover, the plan provides direct truck access from the interchange to the market, but not any new egress from the market area. ❖

Long Island Bus Ridership Keeps Rising

Although the economy has slumped and LIRR ridership saw a 2% drop last year, 2002 was the busiest year in Long Island Bus' 29-year history. Mitch Pally of the Long Island Association told *Newsday* he believed the divergence of rail and bus trends is attributable in part to the fact that more and more Long Islanders work on Long Island.

L.I. Bus' continued success is all the more remarkable given **the agency's orphan status**. Nassau County wants to stop funding it, and chips away at its contribution to bus operations every year. But no dedicated MTA revenue stream exists to take up the slack. Long Island Bus would do even better if this problem was addressed head on, with state legislation specifying new revenue, rather than occasionally via the threat of service cuts. ❖

Time Ticking Down for Tolls?

An MTA budget official told the NYC City Council last week that discussions between the transit umbrella agency and the Bloomberg administration about **placing tolls on the city's East River bridges** were only "preliminary," according to the *Daily News*. City transportation commissioner Weinshall told the Council that there was not yet any decision about tolls.

The comments came as the New York Financial Control Board warned that Mayor Bloomberg's budget-closing plan was in serious trouble.

East River tolls were expected to be part of negotiations between the city and the MTA over several elements of budget and policy. The mayor's budget for 2004 reduces city support for the MTA capital program by \$31 million, according to news reports last week, but the reduction would have to be approved by the state legislature. Mayor Bloomberg also wants the MTA to take over **the city's franchise bus system**, which operates numerous bus routes in Queens, the Bronx and Brooklyn.

The MTA has said it cannot take on the bus routes without additional resources; hence the wide expectation that city-MTA talks would encompass tolls.

However, time may be running out for Mayor Bloomberg to get moving on tolls. If tolls are not set up on the bridges before the fall of 2004, the mayor would run the risk of pushing toll implementation into the **2005 city election season**. Given that considerable lead time will probably be needed to establish an overall toll plan and implement it, the mayor needs to win backing for tolls in this year's state budget deal. Otherwise, it looks more like a second-term initiative. ❖

Time's Up for CT Traffic Relief Mandate

The Connecticut Dept. of Transportation has not achieved vehicle-miles traveled reduction goals established in a **1997 state law**. The statute directed ConnDOT to implement measures capable of reducing peak period vehicle miles traveled (VMT) by 5% — 8,600 cars — on Interstate 95, the Merritt Parkway and Route 1 between Branford to Greenwich. Instead, over the five-year period, peak period VMT on the highways has actually increased by 5%, according to the *Connecticut Post*.

The results are not surprising, for several reasons. Most immediately, ConnDOT missed its yearly VMT benchmarks by as much as 50%. Its strategies were generally geared toward **boosting mass transit ridership** in the corridor, with little focus on transportation demand management strategies. ConnDOT can claim some success on the transit front, reporting that transit ridership has increased by 6,635 since the mandate was established. However, transit ridership

in the metropolitan region increased significantly during the latter 1990s. It's unclear how much of the increase is due to specific policy initiatives and how much is attributable to the strong economy during the period, or other factors like commuter frustration with jammed highways.

ConnDOT also missed goals to increase ridesharing, carpooling, van pooling, telecommuting, off-peak rail commuting and ferry ridership.

At any rate, building train and bus ridership will not necessarily reduce highway trips — transportation dynamics are more complex than that. To be fair to ConnDOT, a workable VMT reduction strategy would probably need a longer time horizon than five years, and it would certainly need to incorporate land use policy, which is not now in ConnDOT's purview. Much of what drives VMT growth in our region is sprawling development patterns. As origins and destinations get further from each other, more and longer car trips are needed for everyday tasks.

The 1997 plan was championed by the Coastal Corridor Coalition, made up of civic, business and environmental groups. It envisioned a transportation strategy that would combine additional transit service and private sector policies to reduce traffic on I-95, the Merritt Parkway and Route 1.

Many transportation reformers hoped the recommendations of Transportation Strategy Board in December would provide Connecticut with recommendations to develop a plan focused on reducing sprawl — the root cause of worsening congestion in the state. Yet the Board's final documents **failed to identify sprawl as a transportation issue**. Instead, the TSB recommended that nearly two-thirds of the 10-year budget be dedicated to road expansion projects likely to worsen sprawl. Much of the road money (over \$1.5 billion) is to widen I-95 and I-84.

A recent *Connecticut Post* editorial reiterated the need for mass transit investment: "The [VMT reduction] project taught us that the emphasis on mass transit solutions must continue for southwestern Connecticut and with greater prominence and increased spending," they said. "**Expanded highways aren't the solution**. The cost to build is astronomical and the state at this point has maxed out its Special Transportation Fund which underwrites major road construction. In the end, the return would only be more lanes of clogged highways." ❖

The Tri-State Transportation Campaign web site:

www.tstc.org

Calendar

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

April 2, 4:30pm, President's Forum, Permanent Citizens Advisory Committee to MTA — Peter Cannito, Metro-North RR, 347 Madison Ave, 5th Floor, mail@pcac.org, 212-878-7087

April 2, 9am, "Moving Transportation in the Right Direction," NJ Clean Air Council public hearing. NJ DEP Public Hearing Room, 401 E. State Street, Trenton, 609-633-0530 www.state.nj.us/dep/cleanair.html

April 3, 11:45am, Transportation Research Forum: "View from the NJ Turnpike," Michael Lapolla, executive director, NJ Turnpike, 212-435-4226, pgessner@panynj.gov

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

April 10, 4:30pm, President's Forum, Permanent Citizens Advisory Committee to MTA — Acting president, LIRR. 347 Madison Ave, Manhattan. 5th Floor, mail@pcac.org, 212-878-7087

April 22, 5pm, PCAC President's Forum — Lawrence Reuter, NYC Transit. 347 Madison Ave, Manhattan. 5th Floor, mail@pcac.org, 212-878-7087

April 25, 8am, Regional Plan Association Regional Assembly, "Shaping the Region for the 21st Century," Workshop Topics: New Economic Geography, Rebuilding Lower Manhattan, Leveraging Health for Smart Growth, The Future of Transportation, Sustaining Park and Open Space Initiatives, more. Marriott Marquis, Manhattan, www.rpa.org, 212-253-2727

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

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



Mobilizing the Region

MTR#408 Contributing: Danielle Burger Editors: Jon Orcutt, Kate Slevin Executive Director: Janine Bauer

240 West 35th Street #801, New York, NY 10001 tel. (212) 268-7474 fax (212) 268-7333 tstc@tstc.org