

Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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NEWS

NJ's Transportation Construction Raid

A new report from the New Jersey legislature says the McGreevey administration has shifted \$180 million from the transportation trust fund — meant to provide capital funding — into the state's **general fund** and NJ Transit's operating budget, according to the *Star-Ledger*.

Some of Transit's capital budget has been shifted to cover operating expenses for several years now. In February, we reported that NJ Transit would shift \$260 million from capital to operating, similar to the shift seen in FY2003 (*MTR #402*).

It's unclear how that amount relates to the findings in last week's report by the NJ Office of Legislative Services. Some of the money identified in the report may be **NJ DOT** funds, and not all of the money shifted into NJ Transit's operating budget may come from the state trust fund.

In any event, the report points again to the **perilous state of transportation capital spending** in New Jersey. This must be addressed when the governor and legislature take up reauthorization of the state **transportation trust fund** next year. NJ Transit chief George Warrington has said deferred maintenance is already showing up in deteriorating station conditions. It will show up in additional places on the roads and rails unless the state's leaders stop the capital budget bleeding very soon. ❖

Gas Tax Hike Pending for NJ ?

As if on cue, Assemblyman John Wisniewski, Chair of the New Jersey Assembly's Transportation Committee, said last week he would sponsor a bill for a **state gas tax increase**. But he said such a bill would only provide a short-term solution to NJ's transportation funding woes. In his remarks at the TransAction conference in Atlantic City, he advocated for higher **DMV fees** permanently dedicated to transportation capital spending. Currently, only \$200 million of the \$700-\$900 million in annual DMV revenue goes towards transportation (the remainder goes into the general fund).

New Jersey's gas tax, at 10.5 cents, is among the lowest state gas tax in the U.S.. The state's transportation trust fund, which distributes transportation construction funds from state revenues, needs to be reauthorized, with new revenue sources, in 2004. ❖

Bloomberg Zags on Tolls

The week that Governor Pataki says he is ready to consider East River bridge tolls, Mayor Bloomberg finally admits **the city has done nothing to prepare** for their implementation and says getting them up and running will take too long to make a difference in the current fiscal crisis.

Perhaps the mayor's statement is part of a gambit to force Albany's hand regarding the commuter tax, though it is hard to locate a less equivocal position in NY State than the governor's and Senate Majority Leader Joseph Bruno's opposition to the latter.

The fiasco reflects the striking incoherence with which the city administration has approached bridge tolls. The mayor includes them in his budget and talks about them from time to time, **stimulating headlines and opponents** in Queens and Brooklyn. Some negotiation over leasing the bridges may be going on between the city and MTA. But no Bloomberg political or technical plan to move toward toll implementation has ever been in evidence. City Hall even managed to force the governor into publicly opposing tolls by generating a series of **news stories** on the topic during the **thick of last year's gubernatorial election**.

If Mayor Bloomberg has ruled out a deal on bridge tolls during this budget season, it's hard to regard them as anything that will move during the mayor's current term. If he wins re-election and is serious about bridge tolls, the mayor will need to bring much more commitment and skill to the issue than he has shown to date. ❖

Thruway Aims to Add Lanes in Orange County

The NY State Thruway Authority is likely to recommend widening the Thruway to **six lanes** between Woodbury and Newburgh, an 18-mile stretch through Orange County. Ramesh Mehta, a leading Thruway official, said he expected an Authority study of the road between Woodbury and New Paltz to recommend adding lanes. He made his remarks last week at a transportation forum in New Windsor organized by the Orange County Chamber of Commerce and other groups.

If proposed, the Thruway expansion would be one of the **largest highway widening plans** under consideration in downstate New York. The Thruway is

presently developing a six-year capital program. The Thruway is reportedly seeing record levels of traffic at interchanges in the area.

The policy question that environmentalists and others will undoubtedly raise is whether the road needs to be widened in response to traffic created by the march of sprawl development across Orange County, or whether the expansion will mainly **promote further sprawl northward?**

Government as Smart Neighbor?

Suffolk County Executive Robert Gaffney vetoed a proposal last week that would require new **county office buildings** to be **located in downtowns**. Gaffney said he vetoed the plan because it does not present a clear definition of what constitutes a downtown area, is difficult to enforce, and would add to an existing “bureaucratic morass” in siting county office facilities. Gaffney said the idea is “well-intentioned” and asked county legislators to work with him to make it easier to implement. It is unclear how long it will take for the county to produce a revised bill.

The notion that government should set an example in smart growth planning is a good one, and we hope Suffolk follows through. A good recent example is the relocation of the NY State Dept of Transportation Region 1 headquarters to **downtown Schenectady**, a city that can use the jobs and activity. Schenectady is now home to several state offices, including the Department of Taxation and Finance, the Department of Labor, the Worker’s Compensation Board, and the Commission on Quality of Care for the Mentally Disabled. With the addition of NYDOT, the state brings about 900 employees into downtown Schenectady each day.

Earlier this month, Nassau County Executive Suozzi released a report recommending consolidating County offices in an effort to save money and create better employee work environments. The report recommends focusing government operations and possibly health and human services in downtown Mineola, and consolidating various public safety-related offices into a larger campus in Bethpage. According to the report, parking is currently a major problem at the Mineola campus, and moving police headquarters from there to Bethpage would ease the shortage. While the consolidation plan may bring more jobs into Mineola, where frequent train and bus service is available, it appears to **fall short as a transit-friendly development plan**. The report recommends building more parking (possibly a 977 space parking structure). The Bethpage location is far from any reasonably frequent transit service. The report is available at <http://www.co.nassau.ny.us/exec/pr032603.html>. ❖

The announcement also likely adds a new wrinkle to the joint Thruway/Metro-North effort to build a **new Tappan Zee Bridge**. The likelihood of northward Thruway expansion, combined with congestion relief at the Tappan Zee, will need to be included in the land use impact models for the project.

In contrast to Mehta’s remarks, Robert Dennison, head of the NY State DOT’s Poughkeepsie office, said the DOT was focusing more on reliability than capacity. According to the *Times Herald-Record* of Middletown, he avoided saying that casino development in Sullivan County would necessarily require the widening of Route 17. ❖

Second Avenue Subway Plan Shapes Up

The MTA has scheduled hearings in May (the 12th and 13th, see calendar) for input on the recently released supplemental draft environmental impact statement for the Second Avenue subway project. The supplement to the EIS considers the elements for subway construction along the **entire 125th Street-lower Manhattan route**. The original draft only considered a 125th St.-63rd St. project, that would link into the Broadway tunnel, but that was disparaged by many constituencies as a “stub-way” that would fail to meet the East Side’s needs or significantly unburden much of the jam-packed Lexington Avenue line.

Main features of the line would be 16 stations along the East Side, with likely connections to the Lexington line at 125th Street, the E/V at 53rd Street, the #7 at 42nd Street, the L at 14th St., the F/V at Houston St. and the B/D at Grand Street. Stations would be along Second Avenue and on Water Street in lower Manhattan. A **track connection at 63rd Street** would allow service between upper Second Avenue and the Broadway Line, continuing to Brooklyn. It could also permit a new service between Queens and lower Manhattan, though the EIS summary says this could depend on other service reconfigurations or future expansion of the Queens subway network. The line would also be constructed to allow future direct extensions into the Bronx and Brooklyn.

The supplemental draft EIS is available on-line at www.mta.info/planning/sas/. Hard copies are available at most Manhattan libraries and at all Manhattan community board offices, as well as several other locations.

Transit sources and Manhattan Borough President C. Virginia Fields – a major backer of the plan – told reporters the Second Avenue line is scheduled for **groundbreaking** at the end of 2004.

Funding still a huge issue

We hope they are right, but funding the project will be a big issue for years to come. Although the

MTA's 2000-2004 capital plan included \$1 billion for Second Avenue subway design and early construction work, overall construction could cost up to \$16 billion.

A February Federal Transit Administration report on "new start" transit projects underway around the country raised an eyebrow toward Second Avenue subway finances. The project's "**cost effectiveness**" rating was given as "low," although it still received an overall "recommended" stamp and a small amount of FTA funding. The finding could add to New York's struggle to win major federal funding for the Second Avenue line in competition with other projects around the country. In any event, New York and the MTA will have to come up with a lot of local money to build it.

But in fairness to the project and the MTA, the FTA "new starts" ranking criteria emphasize attraction of new transit riders, and are thus **stacked against** system expansion projects within **mature transit systems**. It would be a major victory for New York's and other urban legislators to fix this problem in this year's pending six-year federal transportation funding bill. The FTA report also pegged the start-date of revenue service on the Second Avenue line as 2021.

FTA's view on other projects in the region

The same FTA paper recommended a "full funding grant agreement" between the FTA and MTA for construction of the LIRR East Side Access project, which will connect the railroad to Grand Central Terminal. Such an agreement commits the FTA to a multi-year funding effort to see the project through. The FTA recommended \$75 million in federal funding for this year. East Side Access is expected to be operating by 2012.

For Connecticut, the report **refused to issue a rating** for the **Hartford-New Britain busway**, a bus rapid transit project in a rail corridor south of Hartford. It stated that the FTA has "serious concerns" about cost-effectiveness information submitted by ConnDOT, and says it is trying to resolve issues connected with assumptions and calculations regarding the project's expected benefits.

In New Jersey, FTA full funding grant agreements are already in place for the Hudson-Bergen and Newark-Elizabeth light rail projects. ❖

NJ Sees Park-n-Ride Proliferation

A session at TransAction this week, entitled "The Paved Paradise: Commuter Parking Lots," explained New Jersey's commitment to building new train station parking, and raised questions as to whether state funded development priorities are really promoting smart growth.

In 2000, NDOT was mandated by the Transportation Trust Fund to build or expand at least two park-and-ride facilities in each of the next five years. Over the first three years of the mandate, NJDOT has exceeded these goals, even while ignoring concurrent mandates to step up work on bridge maintenance and bikeway projects. It has also been seeking ways of better coordinating administrative and real estate issues that impede acquiring and/or building new parking lots. More recently, in November 2002, Governor McGreevey stated that, as part of his smart growth agenda, NJ would build **20,000 parking spaces** in the next five years at train and bus stations (at a cost of \$13 million this year alone).

While the stated goal of park-and-rides — to get people out of their cars and onto mass transit — may seem worthy, some at the session questioned whether the new parking facilities would accomplish this. If it **encourages more local driving**, it will worsen congestion and pollution in the host community. Only about half of NJ train riders drive their own cars to get to train stations, and more than 70% of bus riders walk to their stops. More parking is likely to increase driving to transit centers.

Park-and-rides may be the only option in outlying areas. However, current priorities for new parking are along the Montclair branch, at the Secaucus transfer, and along the light rail lines. The smart growth and transit challenges in these areas ought to be to bring **feeder transit** service and higher-value development to the station areas.

Unfortunately, only a few speakers at TransAction made the point that NJ cannot pave its way to smart growth. NJDOT officials said they were looking at other transit access options, including bikeways, community shuttles, and increased bus service, but parking is clearly a **runaway first** on the list.

Some NJ towns have the right idea. Rahway and Montclair State University are looking to build multi-level garages in place of spacious service lots, a step in the right direction. Maplewood and Glen Ridge have jitney services between neighborhoods and stations. Others, like South Orange, are looking to develop **affordable housing** and reduce parking requirements near train stations. Yet many NJ towns, even ones with the state's "transit village" designation, are increasing parking supply in downtowns and adjacent to stations. Ideally, transit vil-

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lages would reduce downtown parking, and provide structured parking a few blocks from stations, reserving the immediate station area for **high-value, pedestrian-friendly development**.

If you build it, they will come. The question is whether attracting more traffic with park-and-rides is really helping NJ toward smart growth. ❖

City-Friendly Railroads?

City Comptroller William Thompson Jr.'s office recent audit of Metro North and LIRR train stations found that four of forty MTA stations in NYC had **unsafe conditions**, including leaking water, crumbling platforms, and third rail exposure. All four stations were on the Comptroller's unsafe list last year, though the total number of unsafe stations has fallen by half, from eight to four. The Comptroller's audit said that Metro-North's Westchester stations were in far better condition than those in NYC.

Thompson tagged three Metro-North stations (Tremont, Wakefield and Fordham) and one LIRR station (Murray Hill). Last year, five Metro North stations and four LIRR stations made the list.

Infrequent service and, in a few cases, bad station conditions keep many residents from using LIRR and Metro-North service within the city. The MTA is reportedly still considering the idea of a "**city ticket**" that would allow use of the railroad inside NYC for the price of a subway fare. Along with fixing up the worst stations, the city ticket would be a big step toward city-friendly railroads. ❖

Tug of War for Staten Island Ferries

Last week, the S.I. *Advance* reported that possible NYC layoffs could mean that only two rush hour ferries will operate from Staten Island to Manhattan. NYCDOT currently runs four rush hour ferries across New York harbor, with three during "shoulder" periods.

In response, NYC Transportation Commissioner Iris Weinshall promised SI Borough President James Molinaro at least a three-boat rush hour schedule. Another *Advance* report said ferry riders would rather see the **return of a fare** than experience **service cuts**.

At the same time, Staten Islanders are asking for big increases, not decreases, in ferry service. This week, the SI Chamber of Commerce sent a white paper to Congressman Vito Fossella proposing that a **comprehensive system of ferries and water taxis** be established from SI to other NYC boroughs, NJ, and Long Island. The proposal is meant to better connect the island to the region and reduce ever-increasing congestion on SI roadways. ❖

Calendar

April 15, 6:30pm, Scoping Meeting for the I-95 Commuter Shoulders Project, Darien Town Hall, 2 Renshaw Rd, Darien, CT, 860-594-2002.

April 15, noon, Metro-North RR Commuter Council, Randy Fleischer, Director of Business Development will discuss Metro-North Parking Program, 212-878-7087, <http://www.pcac.org>.

April 16, 6:30pm, Scoping Meeting for the I-95 Commuter Shoulders Project, 100 Myrtle Ave, Westport, CT, 860-594-2002.

April 17, 6:30pm, Scoping Meeting for the I-95 Commuter Shoulders Project, 12700 Norwalk Boulevard, Norwalk, CT, 860-594-2002.

April 22, 5pm, President's Forum, Permanent Citizens Advisory Committee to MTA - Lawrence Reuter, NYC Transit, 347 Madison Ave, 5th Floor, mail@pcac.org, 212-878-7087.

April 22-23, National Transit Institute, "ITS for Transit: Solving Real Problems," Rutgers, 120 Albany St, New Brunswick, NJ, 732-932-1700.

April 24, 5:30pm, "NYC 2012: Transportation Needs for the 2012 Olympics." Deputy Mayor Dan Doctoroff, Club 101, 40th Street and Park Ave, 718-277-8100, ext. 159.

April 25, 8am, Regional Plan Association 13th Annual Assembly, "Shaping the Region for the 21st Century." Workshops include: New Economic Geography; Beyond 16 Acres--Rebuilding Lower Manhattan; Leveraging Health for Smart Growth; The Future of Transportation. Marriott Marquis, NYC, www.rpa.org, 212-253-2727.

April 28, 5:30pm, Voorhees Center Distinguished Speaker, "Transportation and Other Policy Issues: A View from Inside the Beltway," Rep. Robert Menendez, Chairman of the Democratic Caucus. Special Events Forum, Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy, 33 Livingston Ave, New Brunswick, 732-932-6812 x700 or cdanku@rci.rutgers.edu.

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

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



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