

Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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NEWS

MTA Credibility Crisis Rooted in Politics

The problem underlying the MTA's crisis of credibility, as the *NY Times* and Straphangers Campaign defined the furor over the city and state comptroller reports on the transit agency's financial maneuvering and reporting prior to its recent decision to raise fares, is that MTA management functions simply as **a department within the Pataki administration.**

Under previous administrations, the MTA board acted with more independence. It could **explain bad news more readily**, and it could point out state government's shortcomings regarding mass transit.

Behind much of the MTA's current financial difficulties is the retreat of city and especially state fiscal support for day-to-day operations for major capital programs. Where the state under Governor Pataki has relied on **high-percentage fare increases and borrowing** to keep the MTA and its capital program running, earlier capital programs were funded in part by **new dedicated state tax revenues.** Under the Pataki administration, transit managers cannot point out this major financial shift and structural problem without risking their jobs.

Thus, transit advocates could easily predict (see *MTR #386*) that the MTA would announce the bad news regarding its finances **shortly after the close of last year's race for governor**, but not a moment earlier. And they were right.

Last week, the Straphangers Campaign said the MTA faced the worst crisis of public confidence in its 35-year history. Straphangers called for these steps to help restore public confidence in the MTA:

- ◆ Governor Pataki: Appoint an independent blue ribbon panel (a Moreland Act commission) with subpoena powers to investigate MTA finances.
- ◆ Mayor Bloomberg: Audit MTA finances and call off \$200 million in cuts to MTA support.
- ◆ MTA: Delay the May 4th fare increase, release more complete information on fare options and hold a new round of public hearings.
- ◆ State legislature: Enact laws that will make the MTA more accountable to legislators and riders.

Straphangers is also urging its supporters to call Governor Pataki to urge him to delay the fare increase. Straphangers will wage an email and subway leafleting campaign this week, targeting the governor. www.straphangers.org

Inside London's Success With Congestion Pricing

Derek Turner, until recently Transport for London's director of street management, presented the impressive results and the "how-to" story of the "congestion charging" system recently inaugurated in London to New Yorkers last week. Turner headlined the Regional Plan Association's annual regional assembly on Friday, and attended several other meetings with interested parties.

The **£5 charge** for driving in central London that Mayor Ken Livingstone imposed on February 17 has cut traffic volumes in the affected area by about 17%. The charge is not paid via a toll medium like E-ZPass. Rather, motorists who enter the central zone between 7 a.m. and 6:30 p.m. must register (by paying -- over the phone, on the internet, at various pay-points, etc.) for that day's database of permitted vehicles. A system of 700 cameras on the zone's periphery and its interior read the license plates of any unregistered vehicle. If the car's owner does not register (pay) by 10 p.m. that evening, the system levies an £80 fine.

There were predictable warnings of chaos and failure leading up to the system's inauguration. But Turner said the system had proven "**easier and better** than even supportive academics, economists and engineers had predicted."

Turner noted some of the big benefits London is seeing from the traffic reduction:

- ◆ Buses are moving around the central area. In fact, they now need to sit at stops for periods in order to not get ahead of schedule. Bus authorities are now **re-writing schedules** to account for faster, more reliable trip times. Livingstone added 300 buses to the city's fleet prior to pricing's advent. Some of the congestion charge's revenues will also support subway and road improvements.
- ◆ Plans are in the works for a variety of pedestrianization projects, along the lines of the recent walker-friendly reorganization of Trafalgar Square, to make best use of **street space reclaimed from cars.**
- ◆ So far, traffic officials have seen no "return" in traffic levels as London becomes used to the charging system. Vehicle volumes fell abruptly when the charge was introduced and have remained flat at the

-17% level.

Turner said claims that the congestion charge is socially regressive are “**total rubbish**” because car ownership and driving in London’s central area is concentrated higher up on the economic scale, while the use of congestion revenues and the reduction of traffic is improving bus travel, cycling, walking and the subway system. He said “there is no evidence that the less well off are not traveling.”

He also related that civil liberties advocates had not opposed the system. Images of the cars of non-violators are erased from the system after each day. Moreover, police do not have regular access to the system’s data. It will only be provided upon request, and each request must be approved by top-level TfL officials.

Because the vast proportion of those traveling into central London each day use public transit, the congestion charge aims only to affect the behavior of about 20,000 hard core city motorists.

Turner predicted that London’s success with the pricing system marked the writing of a “**whole new book**” on urban transportation policy. Other British cities are expected to consider similar systems, and the UK national government is considering congestion pricing for the motorway system.

In considering the application of London’s experience in New York, it’s worth noting some of the differences in the two policy environments:

- ◆ In London, a rough consensus existed before Mayor Livingstone’s election that transportation and traffic needed to be tamed. Livingstone’s opponents in the election also favored congestion pricing, but proposed less ambitious timetables. In New York, Mayor Bloomberg has taken some steps against congestion, but **busting traffic was not a signature issue** in his election. Moreover, the mayor’s general talk of support for East River Bridge tolls — while supported by the newspapers — has been met with a sniping campaign by Queens and Brooklyn politicians, and the business community has said nothing on the topic.

- ◆ Much of the discussion about bridge tolls in New York has centered on the **fiscal crisis** rather than fighting traffic congestion. If that is seen as tolls’ main impetus, it may be harder to win support for them by assembling an overall transportation policy package. In London, congestion pricing was proposed as part of a mix that included more buses, increased investment in the Underground, much better bus travel conditions, more space for cycling and walking and a set of roadway capital projects.

- ◆ Manhattan is unlikely to see traffic reduction on the order of 17% from the implementation of East River bridge tolls. That’s because much of the car

traffic reaching the Manhattan central business district **already pays** to enter. All of the traffic from New Jersey, and vehicles using the East River tunnels, are subject to tolls. The New Jersey crossings also already feature time-of-day incentive prices to reduce peak congestion. Still, East River bridge vehicle volumes are heavy, and tolls (with high peak prices) would reduce congestion to some degree. Traffic reduction sufficient to boost Manhattan bus speeds and the quality of the pedestrian environment would likely require something **more London-like**: East River tolls, higher Port Authority and MTA toll rates plus a 60th Street pricing cordon that would capture CBD vehicle entries from the north. Abysmal bus speeds on major thoroughfares in the boroughs would not be improved — such routes await some form of bus rapid transit treatment by the city and NYC Transit.

- ◆ Turner pointed out an interesting difference that would appear to favor additional road pricing in the New York area. Outside the new London system, **Great Britain has virtually no road tolls**. Anyone who drives from say, the Jersey shore to Queens knows that tolls are relatively ubiquitous here. In other words, congestion pricing in London represented a bigger cultural leap than we would have to negotiate in adding tolls to a few more New York bridges. The big question thus remains whether New York’s leaders will ever get serious about taming traffic, and put real leadership behind the effort.

During a panel discussion that followed Turner’s address at the RPA assembly, Nassau County Executive **Thomas Suozzi** noted that Long Island had not taken a role in city debates over East River tolls. Instead of opposing tolls, however, Suozzi implied that if they are implemented, he is interested in getting a **piece of their revenue** for needed infrastructure work in Nassau County. Whatever the merits of potential toll revenue flowing outside of the city, Suozzi’s position is a far sight more enlightened and pragmatic than that taken by the group of Queens and Brooklyn officials who keep trying to **shout down** the issue of East River tolls. News last week of NYC Transit’s long-term look at connecting the Jay St. and Lawrence St. stations in downtown Brooklyn reminds that beneath the headlines about the 2nd Avenue Subway and #7 extension, there are a great **many workaday capital improvements** that would improve the subway’s utility and attractiveness in NYC’s boroughs. They will not happen without leadership that is willing to identify and go after the resources needed to build them.

The Tri-State Transportation Campaign web site:

www.tstc.org

NJ Gas Tax Ain't What it Used to Be

A recent Brookings Institution report on gas taxes in the United States points out that the **per-gallon value** of New Jersey's long standing 10.5-cents/gallon state gas tax has been **significantly eroded by inflation**.

This effect was largely **masked** in recent decades by increasing vehicle-miles of travel (and thus fuel consumption), and further by the proliferation of **gas-guzzling suburban utility vehicles**. The U.S. Energy Information Administration estimates that gasoline consumption in New Jersey increased by over 30% from 1980 to 2000, and by nearly 21% from 1990 to 2000 (the Campaign has yet to compare these figures to historical NJ fuel sales and gas tax revenues).

Nonetheless, the Brookings report calculates that in 1992, the NJ gas tax had a value in 2002 dollars of 13.42 cents per gallon. Thus, by 2002, inflation had reduced the value of the nominal 10.5 cents/gallon rate by 27.8%. Even with our gluttonous gorging on gas, the state gas tax – which is

among the lowest in the United States – isn't what it used to be.

To create the **public purchasing power** needed to address New Jersey's infrastructure needs, including the many reasonable demands for more mass transit service around the state, NJ leaders are likely to need to look beyond a few-cent gas tax hike when they reauthorize the state's transportation trust fund next year.

Indeed, NJ Assemblyman John Wisniewski, chair of the Assembly transportation committee, said at last month's Transaction conference that a small gas tax increase would provide only very **short term relief** for New Jersey's transportation funding woes.

The Brookings Institution also warned that a period of flattening VMT and gains in overall motor vehicle fuel economy would further impact gas taxes' value as a transportation investment resource.

The Potential Avalanche Behind Bloomberg's Transit Cuts

As we reported last week, Mayor Bloomberg's budget plan would cut aid to mass transit in two forms: 1) by cutting aid for NYC Transit buses and subways by about \$100 million, and 2) by handing the city's seven private bus lines over to the MTA without providing the agency with any operating support. Unfortunately, the story may not end there.

If the city reduces its contribution to NYC Transit, **the reduction could snowball** into other state and suburban cuts, possibly leaving riders at several systems facing less service and additional fare increases.

The city is required by law to match state "18b" operating funding for NYC Transit. Currently, both the city and state give \$158.1 million annually under the provision to NYC Transit's operating budget (the city's contribution equals about 5% of NYC Transit's total operating budget). A city cut here could well **trigger an equal state cut**. Additionally, following New York City's lead, what would stop executives in **Nassau, Suffolk and Westchester** from taking the opportunity to reduce their counties' troublesome contributions to Long Island Bus, the commuter railroads and the Westchester and Suffolk county bus systems?

The city's franchise bus system receives \$52 million per year in state operating aid, from a fund earmarked for non-MTA systems. It's unclear what would happen to that funding if the buses are transferred to NYC Transit.

City Starts Long-Awaited Truck Route Study

The NYC Dept. of Transportation has hired a consultant – Edwards & Kelcey – and is set to begin the first **comprehensive review** in memory of the city's **truck route system** and map.

City neighborhoods are beset with ever-increasing truck traffic, and designated truck routes are often ignored by truckers seeking faster ways through traffic and around town. With truck traffic projected to increase further in the future, New York City needs a truck system that is clear to truckers, residents and the police, and **minimizes trucks' impacts on communities**.

NYC DOT's web-site says a public roll-out and meetings for input into the study are coming soon. In the meantime, DOT and its consultant have established an **on-line survey** to begin collecting input from civic leaders and citizens about truck impact hot spots around town. The survey can be reached through the truck route study web site: www.nyc.gov/html/dot/html/motorist/truckintro.html. We urge all of our NYC readers to look at the survey and submit truck complaints for the study's consideration.

The web site directs readers to respond to the survey by **May 2**. DOT should extend that deadline, since it has undertaken no publicity work to promote the survey's existence.

The city study was initially broached in 1998. At the time, its goal was stated as moving trucks more quickly through the city. An outpouring of neighborhood sentiment and intervention by many City Council members led the DOT to revise the study's goals (*MTR* #'s 199, 300), and reduction in community impacts from trucks is now central to the effort.

Booth Closing — Coming to a Station Near You

Last week, Transport Workers Union Local 100 released a preliminary list of 62 subway station booths they said the MTA planned to close later this year.

Brooklyn will see the most closures with 23 entries on the list. Riders on the A, F, G, N/R, and D trains riders will be hit hardest.

The list below outlines the stations where TWU representatives say at least one booth will be closed. The MTA says it will not release an official list of station booth closures until sometime in May.

To be closed in July	To be closed by year's end
<p>Manhattan</p> <p>Broad Street (J) 207th St./Wash. Heights (A) 175th Street (A) 188th Street (A) 135th Street (A) 34th Street (A) 23rd Street (C) Bway-Lafayette St. (F) Houston St. (1) Wall Street (4) Fulton Street (4) 23rd Street (6) 33rd Street (6)</p> <p>Brooklyn</p> <p>Ocean Parkway (D) Lawrence Street (R) 59th Street (R) 95th Street (R) Ft. Hamilton Parkway (N) New Utrecht Ave. (N) 22nd Ave.-Bay Pkwy. (N) West 8th Street (D) Greenpoint Avenue (G) Myrtle-Willoughby (G) Bedford-Nostrand (G) Bergen Street (F) Ft. Hamilton Parkway (F) Church Avenue (F) Ditmas Avenue (F) 18th Avenue (F) Avenue N (F) Kings Highway (F)</p> <p>Queens</p> <p>Woodhaven Blvd. (J) Hudson Street (A) Rockaway Blvd. (A) 111th Street (A) 63rd Drive (G) 67th Avenue (G) Sutphin Blvd. (F) Parsons Blvd. (F) Vernon-Jackson (7)</p> <p>Bronx</p> <p>167th Street (D) Fordham Road (D) Bedford Park Blvd. (D) Pelham Parkway (2)</p>	<p>Manhattan</p> <p>Fifth Avenue (R) Cortlandt Street (R) Fulton Street (J) Spring Street (C) Rector Street (1) Wall Street (4) 28th Street (6)</p> <p>Brooklyn</p> <p>Kings Highway (D) 86th Street (R) Rockaway Avenue (C) 15th St./Prospect Pk. (F) Flatbush Avenue (B)</p> <p>Queens</p> <p>Woodhaven Blvd. (G) 33rd Street/Rawson (7) 46th Street/Bliss (7)</p> <p>Bronx</p> <p>149th St.-G. Concourse (4) East Tremont Avenue (2)</p>

Calendar

April 29 (revised), 6:30pm, Scoping Meeting for the I-95 Commuter Shoulders Project, 100 Myrtle Ave, Westport, CT, 860-594-2002, www.dot.state.ct.us/releases/.

April 29, 6pm, Public Meeting on New Haven-Hartford-Springfield Commuter Rail Plan, Windsor Town Hall, 275 Broad Street, 1-800-786-2191, 203-865-2191, www.nhhsrail.com.

April 29, 6pm, Public Scoping Meeting for the Fulton Street Transit Center, Alexander Hamilton U.S. Custom House, One Bowling Green, Manhattan, 718-694-5160, www.mta.info/planning/fstc/.

April 29, 5:30pm, Best Foot Forward: Techniques for Walkable Communities, Association of NJ Environmental Commissions, Voorhees Township Municipal Center, 620 Berlin Road, 973-539-7547, www.anjec.org.

April 30, 6pm, "Smart Growth Assessments: How to make you plans smarter," Somerset County Board of Chosen Freeholders and County Planning Board, Somerset County Administration Building, 20 Grove St., Somerville, NJ, 908-231-7021.

April 30, 6pm, Public Meeting on New Haven-Hartford-Springfield Commuter Rail Plan, Meriden City Hall, 142 East Main Street, 1-800-786-2191, 203-865-2191, www.nhhsrail.com.

May 1, 11:45am, Transportation Research Forum, NY Chapter, Speaker: Frank N. Wilner, "Labor Management Lessons from the Rail Industry: The Enemy is Not Each Other," 212-435-4226, pgessner@panynj.gov

May 6 (revised), 6:30pm, Scoping Meeting for the I-95 Commuter Shoulders Project, Norwalk City Hall, 12700 Norwalk Boulevard, Norwalk, CT, 860-594-2002, www.dot.state.ct.us/releases/.

May 6, 6pm, Public Meeting on New Haven-Hartford-Springfield Commuter Rail Plan, Hartford Union Station, One Union Place, 1-800-786-2191, 203-865-2191, www.nhhsrail.com.

May 7, 6pm, Public Meeting on New Haven-Hartford-Springfield Commuter Rail Plan, Mildred Wakeley Community Center, 7 Linsly Street, North Haven, 800-786-2191, 203-865-2191, www.nhhsrail.com.

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

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



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