

Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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NEWS

Groups Stake out Route 92 Positions

As expected, debate is heating up with the approach of publication of a draft environmental impact statement for the NJ Turnpike Authority's plan to build Route 92, a new-alignment highway across southern Middlesex County.

For example, last week, the road's opponents successfully thwarted an initiative by its advocates to push a supportive letter to Governor McGreevey through the **Central NJ Transportation Forum**. The forum was established in 1999 by agencies and stakeholder groups to resolve issues regarding the Millstone Bypass, another controversial road project. Enough forum participants agreed that such a letter would be premature prior to the impact statement's release that the matter was tabled. But it's unclear how the forum itself can take a position prior to Governor McGreevey doing so, because many state entities — like NJ DOT and NJ Transit — are represented.

Opponents say Route 92 would **fuel traffic and sprawl** in the largest remaining portion of open space in Middlesex County.

Environmental and planning groups have told Governor McGreevey's office that the highway's construction will fly in the face of the governor's smart growth initiative, and seriously damage its credibility. It would ruin 14 acres of wetlands and travel through an area designated on the state's anti-sprawl "big map" as "red," or an area where growth is less desirable. The road and its frequent interchanges (every 1.7 miles) will promote low-density development across a rural area. Even without accounting for new development induced by the highway, the Turnpike Authority's documents show that Rt. 92 would generate an additional **10,000 to 15,000 new vehicles per day** on Route 1 south of Ridge Road and attract over 1,200 additional truck trips to the area in the year 2015.

The road will cost at least \$400 million in construction and mitigation costs. In a time of fiscal woe, that money would be better spent reducing traffic congestion on existing roads. For example, delays on the Turnpike between Exit 8A and the Princeton area can be accommodated by making improvements to Exit 8A tolls and ramps, and at other nearby interchanges and intersections.

Clock Ticking for MTA Reform

The ruling by NY State Supreme Court Justice Louis York last week, directing the MTA to roll back its recent transit fare increases, overshadowed an MTA announcement of steps it says it will take to increase agency transparency and public understanding of its actions.

The basic facts regarding the court's roll-back ruling are these:

- An appeal of the decision by the MTA prevents the two-week clock set by Justice York from beginning to tick.
- The Straphangers Campaign and the MTA both say that the appeal should be expedited, and not drag for weeks or months through the courts.
- The NY group of the AAA filed its own suit at the end of the week to prevent MTA tolls from rising. York's decision addressed only transit fares, but the AAA says the same logic of public accountability should apply to the MTA's toll increase.

However the cases turn out — whether the MTA will need to hold a **new set of hearings** in order to raise tolls and fares — York's ruling elevated the MTA's **public relations** debacle around the fare increase and its budget disclosures to a true **catastrophe**. It will be difficult to imagine a climate going forward this year where MTA reform is not on the minds of decision makers in Albany, editorial writers and the public.

The MTA apparently plans to submit bills in Albany for its own reorganization, in accordance with a general agency consolidation plan outlined by Governor Pataki last fall. That will likely trigger a round of **amendments** seeking to enshrine **greater transparency and public accountability** in state law. A variety of bills that would require the MTA to post performance and budget data on its web site, release budget proposals well in advance of board action and take other, similar actions are already pending in Albany. More far-reaching proposals would switch the power of appointment of the MTA inspector general from the governor to the state's attorney general.

New steps outlined by the MTA itself last week may accomplish some of the aims of this legislation, although we have not yet seen details of the MTA proposals. The MTA Board is likely to soon con-

sider:

More time for budget review: The preliminary budget for the next year will be released in July (moved up from November), and re-released along with a 4-year plan in October. Public comment will be in November, and the next year's final budget will be adopted by December 31. Within 60 days of next year's budget adoption date, an updated four-year plan will be released.

More info on web: All backup financial info will be available on the internet, and preliminary budgets will be sent to the governor, state legislature, NYC mayor and the suburban county executives in July for review.

A City Council Study on Tolls?

A new newsletter from NYC City Council member **Alan Gerson** (lower Manhattan) addresses the issue of East River Bridge tolls and the Council.

[T]he Brooklyn and Queens Council delegations have effectively blocked consideration of bridge tolls. Whether we like it or not, the only way out of this political morass is to develop, creatively, a new consensus in the Council. To accomplish that, I have spearheaded an unprecedented agreement among all members of the Staten Island, relevant Brooklyn, and lower Manhattan Council delegations, across party lines, requesting a comprehensive, regional traffic management study, including consideration of tolls on bridge crossings.

If Gerson and his colleagues manage to pull such a study off, it will be remarkable. The Council has generally weighed in on the issue of bridge tolls in the form of the Queens-Brooklyn shouting-down campaign, as Gerson indicates. On the other hand, Mayor Bloomberg has included bridge tolls in future year budgets and made a variety of supportive comments about them, but **his administration hasn't otherwise lifted a finger** to prepare for toll implementation or develop concrete findings about tolls' likely benefits and impacts.

Indeed, citizen participants in the NY Metropolitan Transportation Council's **Southern Brooklyn major investment study** report that NYC DOT representatives have blocked that study from including East River Bridge tolls in the overall mix of policy options and projects to be analyzed. East River tolls would likely have a strong impact on transportation mode choice, truck routing and traffic levels throughout Brooklyn, and thus should obviously be considered in any comprehensive look at transportation in the borough. It's unknown whether the NYC DOT staffers are acting without instructions from City Hall or the transportation commissioner, or whether Bloomberg administration leaders are trying to keep a lid on the issue.

New group of advisors: The MTA will create an informal group of budget reporting advisors. Former NYC deputy mayors Peter Powers and Stanley Brezenoff, former city budget directors Diana Fortuna and Michael Jacobson, and former city corporation counsel Paul Crotty will be the members of this group.

MTA executive director Katherine Lapp announced the changes at a meeting of the MTA board's finance committee last week.

Full-Build Financial Commitment Key to Second Avenue Subway

There were few surprises in testimony at recent hearings regarding the draft environmental impact statement for the Second Avenue subway.

The project's well-known boosters among elected officialdom, such as Manhattan Borough President C. Virginia Fields and Congresswoman Carolyn Maloney, were on hand to urge it forward. Representatives of groups from the Bronx, Queens and Brooklyn urged that project plans include extensions or connecting services to ensure that **benefits extend beyond Manhattan**. There were understandable grumblings about construction impacts, though even many expressing these said the new line was in the city's long-term interest.

Points from testimony by the Regional Plan Association's transportation expert Jeffrey Zupan provide a useful overview of project benefits, and of the potential pitfalls that the Second Avenue subway project could face as it makes the transition from planning to construction. These bear recounting here:

On the plus side, the MTA has made a major step in adopting a full-length Manhattan line as its preferred alternative, discarding the widely criticized "**stub-way**" (125th-63rd Street) plan proposed in the 1999 draft environmental impact statement. The subway will bring significant benefits to East Harlem — better connections to lower Manhattan and other job sites — especially the string of hospital sites along the East Side. The two new services the plan will create — along 2nd Avenue and from upper 2nd Avenue to the Broadway express tracks — will create new options for riders seeking to get downtown, a feature **consistent with lower Manhattan recovery** efforts. And the line's attraction of East Harlem and Upper East Side riders away from the Lexington Avenue line will help others from around the city and the region, especially Bronx riders and Hudson Valley commuters switching from Metro-North trains.

RPA urged the MTA to undertake several additional planning tasks, from the regional to the local. First, collaborative community planning on station

design and function can help neighborhoods determine how the station areas will develop. More broadly, the MTA should begin formal consideration of connecting services from the boroughs, including through service from Queens subways and eventual tunnel extensions in Brooklyn and the Bronx. Otherwise, the city and the region will not use the huge investment in 2nd Avenue subway construction to its full potential. "The SAS should interconnect major portions of Brooklyn to the east side of Manhattan (now often a difficult subway trip). It should be the means to establish subway service to large expanses of un-served areas in the south Bronx, Co-op City, Southeast Queens and the Lower East Side," RPA testified.

A four-borough service plan would have these features:

- Extension of 2nd Avenue service through a **new tunnel to Brooklyn**, with conversion of the LIRR Atlantic branch to subway service to Jamaica. The line would also allow one-seat rides from JFK to downtown Brooklyn and lower Manhattan.
- A **four-track** 2nd Avenue subway segment between 43rd and Delancey Streets, with a spur into Grand Central, to allow connections with Metro-North and Queens and Lower East Side subways.

To avoid the pitfall of building the "stub-way" with available funding and then having the rest of the plan founder on financial shoals, the MTA should **clearly outline its plans for project phasing and financing now** so that scenarios and consequences of less than full funding can be considered and debated before ground is broken.

MetroCard Misses

Stories of NYC Transit oversights in the elimination of the transit token are popping up in different corners of the city's transit system.

The Staten Island Railway, for instance, does not collect fares except from riders who travel to the St. George ferry terminal. They are the only city riders who **pay when exiting**. However, the station booth no longer sells single-ride cards and multi-denomination MetroCard machines are outside the turnstiles. Cash payments are on the rise, the opposite of what the MTA is trying to encourage.

City Access-a-Ride riders have been eliminated from the money-saving **TransitChek** program, because the vans take only cash or tokens. With the token's demise, TransitChek users must use MetroCard, but that leaves Access-a-Ride out in the cold.

The MTA did announce last week that booth attendants will **provide change** for riders using Metrocards machines. Prior to the announcement, customers could only get up to \$6 in change from machines, and attendants did not freely offer change.

To Save Pedestrians in New Jersey

After news in April that pedestrian deaths in New Jersey were up 37% in 2002, NJDOT Commissioner Jack Lettiere voiced his dedication to doing more about this problem. Here are some of the steps state government can take to address the problem:

First, NJDOT should revive its efforts to reconstruct **intersections and road segments** that have proven to be the **state's deadliest**. A strong body of analytical work was produced in identifying these during the late 1990s. It foundered when the municipalities with some of the worst spots — Newark and Irvington — showed little interest or competence in accepting state help for remedial traffic calming projects. That should not derail DOT's efforts. It should continue and re-energize the program, prioritizing work in municipalities that are receptive to such projects.

Second, DOT could further increase funding for municipal pedestrian safety projects by allocating funds available via the federal set-aside for safety-related construction projects. **Municipal requests** for pedestrian and bike monies made available through DOT's regular local aid program are consistently **several times the amount NJDOT allocates**. The federal safety money offers a way for New Jersey to reduce this deficit. For guidance, New Jersey could look to NY State, which has used some of the federal safety funds for traffic calming grants to Long Island municipalities.

Finally, the incipient "safe routes to school" program NJ DOT is developing should emphasize infrastructure — sidewalks, high visibility crosswalks, bikeways and traffic calming projects — over unproven educational programs.

New Haven Barged Aside

The Connecticut Transportation Strategy Board voted last week that **Bridgeport** should receive up to \$7 million in state funds to host a Long Island Sound **container barge feeder service**. The decision comes after a year of strategy board debate and several years of competition between the cities over the barge facility.

The barge port is designed to help reduce truck traffic and congestion on I-95 between the NY/NJ port southwestern CT. If approved, \$1.5 million will be available to Bridgeport immediately, while \$5.5 million in additional funds will be available in three years.

Newspapers posited several reasons for the choice. First, Bridgeport asked for less money up front than New Haven did. Second, Bridgeport is more economically distressed than New Haven, and thus could use the investment. Third, Bridgeport local officials are closer to the Rowland administration than are New Haven's.

New Haven elected officials opted for the latter

explanation. They criticized the decision, noting that New Haven is better situated for the project geographically. New Haven is further east along I-95, and sits at the I-95—I-91 intersection, so arguably has better northward and eastward highway access than Bridgeport. New Haven hopefully declared that the General Assembly will overturn the vote.

New Long Island Road Chief

New York State Department of Transportation Commissioner Joseph H. Boardman recently announced that **Subi Chakraborti** will be the new Acting Regional Director for New York State DOT's Long Island office (Region 10). Chakraborti comes from the State DOT's New York City office, where he was regional deputy director. He replaces retiring Acting Regional Director **Thomas F. Oelrich**. NY State DOT has yet to identify someone for the permanent position.

The Region 10 director will assume responsibility for the highly controversial **Long Island Transportation Plan (LITP 2000)**. The plan seeks to widen most major roads on Long Island as part of its long term plan. The plan has been widely criticized as inappropriate for Long Island, which is struggling to develop growth and transportation strategies that will work in built-out suburbs.

Suffolk Presses Highway Expansion

Despite strong public opposition, Suffolk County posted a legal notice last week indicating that it was moving ahead to **acquire land** for the widening of **Portion Road** in Lake Ronkonkoma.

The legal notice, posted in *Newsday* May 5, says that the County's widening plan would include traffic and pedestrian safety improvements and that the "general effect of the proposed project on the residents of the locality is positive because it will provide a safer, less congested and more aesthetically pleasing roadway." The decision is supposed to be based on the February public hearing testimony and other public comments. However, community reaction to the plan said overwhelmingly that it would increase congestion and traffic-related fatalities, encourage sprawl, and discourage economic development. The county has also failed to recognize a string of **protests against its plan**, like the one held last Monday by one hundred Lake Ronkonkoma residents.

News stations contacted County Executive Gaffney's office after Monday's protest. Gaffney's office claimed no final decisions on the road expansion had been made, despite the recent legal notice.

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Calendar

May 20, 9am. "Thinking Regionally: TEA-21 Reauthorization and Beyond," NY, NY and CT Department Transportation Commissioners, NYU Wagner Rudin Center for Transportation Policy and Management, bella.pierson@nyu.edu, 212-998-7545.

May 22, 6pm. Public Meeting on New Haven-Hartford-Springfield Commuter Rail Plan, Enfield Town Hall, 820 Enfield Street, 1-800-786-2191, 203-865-2191, www.nhhsrail.com.

May 22, noon. NYC Transit Riders Council meeting, Gennaro Sansone, NYC Transit Chief Maintenance Officer, will discuss new subway equipment, 347 Madison Ave, 212-878-7461, mail@pcac.org, www.pcac.org.

May 24, 8am. CT Bicycle Coalition annual fundraising ride, www.ctbike.org, 203-848-6491.

May 27, 6pm. Auto-Free New York Meeting, "A Transportation Vision for Downtown New York," Councilmember Alan Jay Gerson, NYPD Downtown Center, 104 Washington St, just north of Rec-tor, 212-475-3394, www.auto-free.org

May 27-29. National Transit Institute, Rutgers University, Course: "Public Involvement in Transportation Decision Making", Newark. 732-932-1700.

May 29, 6:30pm. Women's Transportation Seminar, Speaker: Leslie Maeby, NYSDOT TEA-21 Reauthorization Chair, TEA-21 Reauthorization Panel Discussion, Club 101, Corner of 40th and Park Ave, 718-277-8100 ext. 159, rsvp@wtsgny.org

June 4, 4:30pm, Public hearing on MTA federal funding proposals, 347 Madison Ave, Board Room, 5th Floor, 212-878-7483, <http://www.mta.info/mta/cap200-2004.htm>

June 4-5, "Coordinating Transportation and Land Use," National Transit Institute at Rutgers, 120 Albany St, Suite 250, New Brunswick, 732-932-1700, www.ntionline.com

June 5, 2pm and 6pm, Public scoping meeting on the Environmental Impact Statement for the Number 7 Subway Extension Hudson Yards Rezoning and Development Program, Fashion Institute of Technology, 27th Street between 7th and 8th Aves, 212-799-8803, ext. 07.

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

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



Mobilizing the Region

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