

Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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NEWS

Reform Victory in NJDOT Lawsuit Bodes Well for Future

Having won the inclusion of performance objectives and accountability-in-spending amendments in the **NJ Trust Fund Renewal Law** in 2000 against some staunch opposition in the Legislature, and having just prevailed in a lawsuit (see *MTR #420*) to enforce those provisions against NJ DOT's refusal since 2000 to abide those provisions, transportation reformers like the **Tri-State Transportation Campaign** are well-positioned to win further advances in the Trust Fund law renewal in 2004.

The ramifications of the court victory are important. The public and the Legislature can demand of executive branch departments like NJDOT strategic planning and reporting on **how they spend funds** allocated to them. It could represent a big step in reining in departments that have ruled their domains as they've seen fit for some time.

On Trust Fund renewal, NJ's government and construction interests face a tough problem. The Trust Fund is about to **run dry** — again. Governor McGreevey recently appointed a blue ribbon commission of ex-commissioner types to figure out how to re-float it. They are quietly putting together what they hope will be a **persuasive analysis** about NJ's transportation capital and operational needs. They won't talk about the revenue side of the equation until after this fall's legislative elections — most likely, they will back an increase in the state's 10.5-cent per gallon **gas tax**.

But to increase taxes, the established players will need the support of the transportation reform community, and the court's findings will reinforce this role. Especially in light of the governor's anti-sprawl efforts, NJ leaders will need to demonstrate that they are **spending on transportation responsibly**, that their projects are green and not subsidizing sprawl, and that "fixing it first" and transit, rail freight and traffic calming are institutional priorities, not just a grab bag of peripheral projects.

Substantively, reformers are likely to press for ironclad dedication of new revenue, and its allocation to increases in spending on transit capital, cycling and pedestrian projects, rail freight, highway and bridge repair and more Local Aid for counties and municipalities. ❖

Albany Backs Stronger NYC Truck Route Enforcement

Legislation spotlighted here over the early part of 2003 (noted first in *MTR #399*) was approved last week by the State Senate and the State Assembly. As originally written, the bill would have imposed points against truck drivers' licenses if they were caught driving off of approved NYC truck routes, and **increased fines** for such violations. The bill now raises fines (to \$200-\$500 for a first offense and \$1,000-\$2,000 for a third offense), but the **license points provision has been removed**.

Albany sources say the element was removed out of deference to the **NY State Dept. of Motor Vehicles**, which administratively sets rules for charging points against licenses. Legislators said the DMV has stated a commitment to changing its point system to include the provisions originally listed in the legislation, but the time frame for this is unclear.

NYPD officials who addressed Brooklyn communities on truck impacts last winter said many companies are willing to absorb truck route violations as **a cost of doing business**. They supported adding points to drivers' licenses to make deviating from truck routes more difficult and costly.

The legislation was initially sponsored by Assemblyman Joseph Lentol and State Senator Martin Golden, both of Brooklyn. The bill passed **unanimously** in both the Assembly and Senate. Legislative aides say the bill is likely to be sent to Governor Pataki by the end of the summer. First the NYC City Council has to pass a home rule resolution in favor of the bill. The resolution has been introduced by Council member **David Yassky** of Brooklyn, and should be heard in the Council's transportation committee this summer. ❖

Holland Tunnel Truck Changes Set for July

Port Authority and New York City transportation officials have agreed to **relax west-bound access rules** at the Holland Tunnel for two and three axle trucks, likely beginning after the 4th of July holiday. The agencies said they would also seek to permanently bar tractor-trailers from the tunnel.

The news came at a meeting of the **Canal Area Transportation Study**, a multi-agency effort to improve traffic and pedestrian flows, and reduce

transportation impacts in the Canal Street corridor.

Emergency rules have restricted some truck traffic and single-occupant passenger cars from the tunnel since the September 11 attacks in 2001. Originally, trucks were banned altogether from the Holland Tunnel. Smaller trucks were allowed back in for Manhattan-bound trips during an easing of traffic rules last year. Presently, they are not permitted in the tunnel for west-bound trips.

One problem with the present rules is that trucks that enter Manhattan from New Jersey to do business downtown now have to return via the Lincoln Tunnel, creating **more truck mileage** within Manhattan. Port Authority officials said they thought that allowing 2- and 3-axle trucks into the west-bound Holland Tunnel would cause about **2,000 trucks** to shift from the Lincoln Tunnel during a typical 24-hour weekday period.

The change seems a **good compromise** between getting back to business as the downtown crisis eases, and the eminently reasonable interest of Canal Street communities to lock in some of the quality of life and environmental gains they saw when the restrictions caused a big drop in truck traffic.

The officials said that a permanent tractor trailer ban may require a change in the status of the tunnel and of Canal Street as a nationally-designated truck route. Changes in the rule that would permit smaller trucks back into the tunnel will likely come in the form of changes in the mayor's emergency order regarding lower Manhattan after July 4.

Port Authority officials at the meeting estimated that the rush hour carpool rule for passenger cars in effect at the in-bound Holland Tunnel is causing about **1,500 fewer peak car trips** there each day. ❖

NYC Buses: Takeover Funding Unresolved

The *Bronx News* reported last week that the Bloomberg administration expects to have an outline of a plan for **MTA takeover** of city-funded private bus lines at the end of June, rather than a final plan ready for implementation.

Transit advocates support the consolidation of the city-franchised lines with NYC Transit's bus operations, but fear that the city's determination to withdraw financial support from the buses will result in **further budget pressure** on the MTA and service cuts for riders using the now-private lines.

A city hall spokesperson said the city had been engaged in **ongoing discussions** with the MTA and the private lines. He told the paper that the issue of how to subsidize the routes' operations was still unresolved. Transport Workers Union Local 100 has filed a grievance saying it has been excluded from the negotiations. Some of the issues to be resolved involve the contracts for the workers at the private bus companies. ❖

City's Truck Route Study Faces Big Challenge

NYCDOT representatives emphasized that **community participation was "integral"** to the success of its new Truck Route Management study at the project's community kick off meeting last week.

This is welcome news to transportation and environmental advocates, community groups, and elected officials who, in 1999, fought against the design of city's truck route study, which focused more on moving trucks more quickly through the city than **mitigating trucks impacts** in local neighborhoods. The goal of the new study is to "establish a set of recommendations to assist the department in mitigating negative impacts of truck traffic."

About 50 people attended the meeting, though some said the location (Manhattan's City College) discouraged more from attending. Most participants were from community boards or civic groups in Brooklyn and the Bronx.

Many groups said they needed a solution before the 12-month study is completed, since trucks were destroying the foundations on their homes, setting off car alarms, generating night-time noise pollution and knocking over parking meters. Advocates said DOT should implement **traffic calming** measures to stop trucks from turning onto or traveling on local streets. They said the effort would be "doomed" if police enforcement did not increase, and suggested the Department look into developing rational pricing policies for trucks at bridges and tunnels.

The study seems mainly focused more on truck route enforcement and mitigating neighborhoods impacts, rather than on a hard look at existing routes and whether they should be changed. However, DOT officials said they were considering **easing truck restrictions on some parkways** that are currently closed to truck traffic. Opening these highways to trucks could surely help mitigate some local truck impacts, but should be accompanied by the repeal of truck routes on parallel local streets. The city should also consider **banning tractor trailers** from some neighborhoods and street classifications.

The results of a recent internet survey of truck problems in the city were presented at the meeting. The 619 responses expressed general frustration that trucks do not stay on appropriate routes, and have terrible effects on community traffic, pedestrian safety, air, and noise conditions. Most responses were at the block level, which raises the question of how DOT is going to **juggle many local problems** in its final recommendations. The effort will have to be revisited once again if its main recommendations focus on better truck route signs.

The next step for the study is a round of borough meetings (see calendar). For more on the truck route study, visit www.nyc.gov/html/dot/ ❖

A Transit Agenda for Brooklyn

Brooklyn transit riders could see significant savings in travel time if a revised proposal from **Community Consulting Services (CSS)** is taken seriously by the MTA. The report, *Better Transit for Brooklyn*, takes findings from a 2001 study and community input into consideration in laying out short-term, mid-term, and long-term solutions to **improve Brooklyn transit**.

And Brooklynites deserve it. Brooklyn riders account for **31% of total MTA ridership** and therefore contribute the highest amount of any borough in farebox revenue, \$714 million a year. At the same time, **transit expenditures per person are lower in Brooklyn** than in all other boroughs served by the MTA. And while ridership is increasing on most Brooklyn transit lines, service is not necessarily following suit. For example, even though average bus ridership in Brooklyn increased by 18.5% from 1997 to 2000, service only increased by 10.9%. This **7.6% gap is higher** than that in any other borough.

The entire CSS report is valuable, but its strength is in laying out relatively short-term, easy to implement improvements that, within the next few years, could greatly improve transit for **hundreds of thousands of people** in Brooklyn.

For example, probably the easiest and cheapest recommendation in the report is instituting **street transfers** - between the Atlantic Ave/Pacific St. and Hoyt Schermerhorn stations, for example - that allow people to exit one subway station, cross the street, and enter another nearby station **without paying a new fare**. Street transfers could be accomplished with simple Metrocard coding, and would cost the MTA little to implement. The CCS report also recommends establishment of more Brooklyn to Manhattan express bus service from southern Brooklyn, increasing service on the **extremely overcrowded L train**, and extending the 5 train into Brooklyn at all hours.

Improving the G train and extending it at all times to Queens Plaza, extending the V train into Brooklyn to allow F express service, and providing bus service to places like Gateway Mall, would greatly help improve north-south transit routes within the borough.

A longer-term strategy is to **re-evaluate existing bus routes** (which are often still simply overlaid on trolley routes that made sense many decades ago), with extensive community input. While Brooklyn bus service extends to most parts of the borough, riders often complain of **slow and sparse service**, and difficult connections with other bus routes or the subway. A new route system, based on commu-

nity input, population changes, intermodal connections, and economic centers, should be established. Express and local bus service along the new lines should also be investigated.

Long term strategies in the report, such as installing **new escalators**, providing real-time bus and train arrival information, making station connections at some of the points identified for near-term MetroCard transfers, and building a **new East River tunnel** are also important improvements to the Brooklyn transit system. But they are costly and won't address short-term overcrowding and service problems.

The report is scheduled to be discussed at a NYS Joint Assembly meeting with BK Borough Pres. Marty Markowitz on July 15th. We strongly urge elected and MTA officials to take the *Better Transit for Brooklyn* report to heart. With **new development** in the borough that will increase **transit ridership**, such as a revamped Atlantic Ave terminal, the Downtown Brooklyn rezoning and the recently announced Williamsburg rezoning, crowded conditions on Brooklyn's bus and subway system will only get worse without service upgrades and improvements.

For more info on the report, go to www.communityconsulting.org. Report co-author Carolyn Konheim will speak about Brooklyn's transit agenda at an Auto-Free NY meeting Tuesday, June 24 (see calendar). ❖

As Fares Rise, TransitChek Catches On

Transportation fringe benefits are becoming increasingly popular, and many elected officials in NY are responding.

According to a recent *Crain's* article, enrollment with TransitCenter, the main non-profit that runs the TransitChek program in NYC, increased 40% between April of last year and April of this year. TransitChek takes advantage of a federal pre-tax mass transit program that allows employees to spend up to \$100 of pre-tax income on transit. The increase is due in part to the recent fare increases for MTA bus, subway and railroad services.

Additionally, the transit benefit saw action in these areas last week:

- ◆ Senator Chuck Schumer is pressing again for his legislation to even out transportation fringe benefits for drivers and mass transit riders, and increase the benefit for both. Currently, transit riders are eligible for only \$100 in pre-tax spending on transit, while drivers can use up to \$170 pre-tax for parking. Under Schumer's legislation, both transit riders and drivers will be able to spend \$190. The bill would benefit commuter rail riders, many of whom spend

more than \$100 a month on transit. The bill (the "Commuter Benefits Equity Act" -- S. 661) is waiting to be heard by the Finance Committee. Co-sponsors include Senators Clinton, Warner (VA), Sarbanes (MD) and Kennedy (MA).

◆ City Council Speaker Gifford Miller's bill that would require companies with more than 50 employees to **offer TransitChek** still awaits a hearing in the Council's Transportation Committee. No date has been set.

◆ Meanwhile, **NJ state employees** still await transit benefits that were approved for them over a year ago. The New Jersey legislature and Acting Governor Donald DiFrancesco **approved a Transit-Chek style program for state agencies in 2001**. The measure has gone unimplemented during Governor James McGreevey's first 15 months in office. ❖

Mayor Raps "SHARE"

In response to the federal transportation funding plan called "SHARE" favored by southern and Midwestern states (see *MTR* #418), **Mayor Bloomberg** last week said any "minimum guarantee" provisions should apply across all federal programs. The "SHARE" plan, backed by House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, would guarantee that every state receive at least 95% in federal transportation aid of the amount that motorists in that state pay in federal gas taxes. The formula would **reduce New York's federal aid by \$300 million** per year, because NY is the least car-dependent state.

With visiting members of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, Mayor Bloomberg held a press conference pointing out that, all told, New York citizens and businesses pay billions more in federal taxes than NY State receives back from all federal programs. The mayor estimated New York could net **up to \$17 billion** more a per year if the 95% factor applied to all federal programs, not just transportation.

"You would think that Congress would want to reward us for decreasing the nation's dangerous reliance on **foreign oil**," Mayor Bloomberg said to reporters. The *Daily News* also weighed in, urging DeLay to "leave transportation to those members of Congress who actually understand it."

The *News'* editorial board was visited this week by a bipartisan House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee members who presented their plan for a **five-cent increase** in the U.S. gas tax to pay for an expanded 6-year transportation bill. Recent reports say House and Senate committees will introduce their "TEA-3" bills after July 4. ❖

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Calendar

June 24, 6pm, Auto- Free New York meeting, "Brooklyn Transit Agenda," Carolyn Konheim, Community Consulting Services., 104 Washington St., 212-475-3394, www.auto-free.org.

June 26-29, International Trails and Greenways Conference. "Trail Link: Designing for the Future," Providence, RI, 202-974-5152, www.railtrails.org.

June 26, noon, NYC Transit Riders Council meeting. Barry Feinstein, MTA board member, chair of NYC Transit Committee, 347 Madison Ave, 5th Floor board room, www.pcac.org, 212-878-7087.

July 8, 6pm, NYC Truck Route Management Study borough meeting, Staten Island Borough Hall, 10 Richmond Terrace.

July 10, 6pm, NYC Truck Route Management Study borough meeting, Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association, 62 Mott Street, Manhattan.

July 14, 6pm, NYC Truck Route Management Study borough meeting, Bronx Lebanon Hospital Milstein Building-Community Room, 1650 Selwyn Ave

July 15, 6pm, NYC Truck Route Management Study Borough Meeting, Brooklyn Borough Hall, Brooklyn 209 Joralemon Street.

July 10-26, "Designing the High Line," Culmination of international ideas competition seeking visionary design proposals for High Line's reuse as 1.5-mile-long elevated public promenade, Grand Central Terminal's Vanderbilt Hall, Info: www.thehighline.org/.

July 29, 6pm, Auto-Free NY meeting, "Achieving Consensus for Regional Transportation Investments," Tom Schulze, NYMTC, 104 Washington Street, just north of Rector St, 212-475-3394, <http://www.auto-free.org>.

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

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



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