

# Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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## NEWS

### **Court is Not Last Stop for Straphangers**

The Straphangers Campaign will appeal last week's decision by the NY State Supreme Court Appellate Division upholding the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's transit fare increases.

"We respectfully disagree with the appeals court ruling. We want the MTA to level with riders," said State Senator Eric Schneiderman, lead counsel for the Straphangers Campaign.

The appeals court decision reversed a ruling by a lower court which found that the MTA had not provided the public with sufficiently **accurate financial information** before public hearings on the fare increase. If the appeals court upheld the decision, the MTA would have had to reduce fares and repeat the fare hike process.

Officials with the NY chapter of the AAA are said to also be considering a further appeal regarding MTA bridge and tunnel toll hikes, but may face a tougher road because **MTA toll increases** do not by law have to be preceded by **public hearings**.

Even the Straphangers Campaign may face some difficulties. Last week's decision by a five judge appeals panel was unanimous, so the court is not obliged to hear a further appeal.

While the court ruling, at least for now, saves the MTA from the difficulty of rolling back fares and holding a new set of public hearings, the fare hike, the lawsuits and the publicity around them have played a strong role in building a **consensus that MTA processes must be reformed**. Editorial opinion remained strong on this point in the wake of the court's decision. The *Daily News* encouraged a further plaintiffs' appeal and urged the NY State legislature to mandate more open MTA decision-making processes.

The NY State Senate is also reported to be launching a set of hearings on the issue in the near future. It may still take some doing to get Albany's players in sync around the issue. If the legislators take the **MTA's proposed reorganization bill** (see *MTR #420*), which contains a big variety of far-reaching changes, the grab-bag of MTA reform could be sufficiently big that many competing agendas will come into play, and it will take time to reconcile them. But even if this is true, the notion of MTA reform is a strong one now. Expect change.

### **Transportation Tests Still Ahead for McGreevey Sprawl-Fighting Campaign**

While NJ Governor James McGreevey's willingness to tackle the issue of sprawl head-on has generally won him high marks from environmentalists, there are critical transportation policy decisions ahead that can still make or break the governor's credibility on the issue.

Today's transportation choices and tomorrow's land uses are inextricably linked. Extending highways into relatively undeveloped areas promotes accessibility, low density car dependent residential construction and "single-family" office parks — in a word, sprawl.

Little has been heard lately from these key McGreevey administration initiatives:

- **Blue Ribbon Transportation Commission.** The governor empaneled a group of former state officials and others this winter to assess New Jersey's transportation needs and recommend ways to pay for them. The commission could point the way to the administration's policy for reauthorizing the state Transportation Trust Fund, which will run out of money again in 2004. However, sprawl foes will be on guard against action to simply give NJ DOT more money. They will want the policy language from the 2000 Trust Fund legislation strengthened. That law directed NJ DOT to spend more of its resources fixing bridges and road surfaces, and extending bikeway networks (*MTR #277*). A NJ court recently found that DOT had failed to plan to meet these goals, or to tell the legislature and public where its programs stood in relation to them (*MTR #420*).

- **Route 92** The Turnpike Authority's proposed new Route 92 project would unleash a new round of sprawl in southern Middlesex County and cause havoc with Route 1 traffic. The McGreevey Administration said this spring it was reviewing the project, and release of final environmental review documents appears to be held up as a result (*MTR #418*). It's unlikely the governor's anti-sprawl stance would survive a decision to build the new road, but there have been no detectable hints as to which way his decision will go.

- **Route 15** NJ DOT indicated over the winter that

it was close to beginning environmental review for the widening of Route 15 in Sussex County. The project will increase development pressure in the environmentally sensitive highlands. Nothing has been heard again about this project all spring or summer, though the administration's recent designation of Sparta, a town along Route 15, as a development "center" may indicate that the governor is willing to battle with the greens over the fate of the highlands.

### **AAA Backs Cross-Bronx Tunnel, Widening**

A recent article published by the Automobile Club of New York expressed support for burying portions of the Cross Bronx Expressway.

Over the past few years, community advocates in the Bronx and the Tri-State Transportation Campaign have urged the NY State DOT to consider **decking over** the many sunken sections of the Cross Bronx in order to reclaim land and reduce the highway's impacts in commercial and residential districts. The DOT has included the decking concept in its ongoing "major investment study" for the Cross Bronx and Major Deegan highway corridors.

The AAA proposal would widen the six-lane Cross Bronx to eight lanes, but bury much of the highway. It isn't clear yet which sections would be decked or tunneled, how the already sunken sections would be widened, or what the cost would be for widening and tunneling. Transportation reformers would insist on an extensive study of possible **induced traffic demand** as part of any effort to add lanes to the Cross Bronx. It's possible congestion would shortly return to today's levels even with additional lanes.

Community support for decking some of the sunken sections is based on the idea of recovering some of the area above the expressway for public space, mass transit corridors or bike-pedestrian greenways.

The seven-mile long Cross Bronx Expressway carries more than 175,000 vehicles each day, and is extremely congested during peak hours.

Another way to reduce congestion on the Cross Bronx, backed by the Campaign and many Bronx groups, would be to **eliminate the Sheridan Expressway** and its Cross-Bronx interchange.

The difficult interchange between the Cross Bronx and Major Deegan Expressways sends many of the biggest trucks onto the Cross Bronx, even if they are bound for Bronx destinations along the Deegan or connecting Bruckner expressways. The AAA, the Tri-State Transportation Campaign and some Bronx groups all agree on the need to modernize the highway connections there.

### **MTA's Toll Policy Lags**

A Sunday (7/13) *Newsday* retrospective on E-ZPass' first 10 years in the metropolitan region noted that while agencies from the NJ Turnpike, the NY State Thruway and Port Authority had embraced some form for congestion pricing and are developing a variety of **high-speed E-ZPass applications** to increase traffic through-put at toll plazas, the MTA has decided against making progress in either area.

A week earlier, an MTA spokesperson cited by a *Newsday* reporter seemed unaware that the Port Authority had implemented an aggressive congestion pricing system at its Hudson River crossings, and claimed the MTA was "studying" variable pricing options (see *MTR* #424).

In the broader E-ZPass piece, the reporter accurately noted that the MTA had no plans to implement any form of congestion pricing. A Tri-State Transportation Campaign spokesperson anticipated some of the agency's **usual objections** to higher-speed or **open road tolling**, stating that the MTA will complain that its crossings connect to highly congested city street systems, so that there is little purpose in speeding drivers through toll plazas.

True to form, an MTA Bridges and Tunnels spokesperson called the Outerbridge Crossing — where the Port Authority is establishing open road tolling — "peripheral," but did not consider whether the same label might apply to MTA bridges like the Throgs Neck. Many of the MTA's crossings, including the Whitestone, TriBorough and Verrazano are primarily **links in the region's highway network**, rather than portals to local streets. The Port Authority will also set up open road tolling at the George Washington Bridge, which probably cannot be labeled "peripheral."

The MTA did not charge that agencies that are developing high-speed toll collection systems and have abolished toll booth gates are losing money, though we doubt the agency has abandoned that position. Toll authorities like those in NJ say their enforcement systems will prevent any revenue loss due to toll beaters slipping into high speed lanes.

### **Region's U.S. Reps Must Defeat Radicals on Transit Funding**

If the Appropriations Subcommittee on Transportation, Treasury, and Independent Agencies in the U.S. House of Representatives has its way, funding for transportation programs that are vital to the mobility and economic health of the region in the metropolitan region could be severely cut.

The Subcommittee recently marked up a fiscal year 2004 appropriations bill that would **reduce funding for Amtrak by half** and reduce or eliminate funding for other mass transit and transporta-

tion alternatives programs that greatly benefit the tri-state region.

The bill is disastrous for Amtrak. It reduces funding for the company from \$1.04 billion to \$580 million. With only \$580 million in subsidy, Amtrak have no choice but to shut down, severely affecting transportation and the economy of the entire Northeast and other parts of the country. This action is particularly surprising since a majority (219 Members) of the House of the Representatives has written to the Appropriations Committee urging funding of \$1.8 billion, the level specified by Amtrak President David Gunn as the minimum needed to implement the railroad's five-year improvement program.

The Subcommittee bill also **eliminates the Transportation Enhancements Program (TEP)**, a program that since 1991 has provided a consistent source of funds for countless pedestrian, bicycling, historic preservation and community development projects in the region. For example, the TEP program has made projects such as the Herald Square Pedestrian Improvement Project, the Westchester Avenue Bicycle Route and the Sunrise Highway Pedestrian Streetscape possible. The Bronx River Alliance and other local groups have already expressed their dismay about this appropriation. The bill also looks to cut similar smaller, innovative, transportation programs, such as the **Job Access/Reverse Commute program**, which supports transportation providers helping workers and job-seekers in lower income communities reach job sites that are not otherwise accessible to them.

Federal Transit Administration "**New Starts**," would also be cut by at least \$150 million if the appropriations bill is approved. Projects that do not yet have FTA "full funding grant agreements" such as the Second Avenue subway, a second NJ-NYC commuter rail tunnel or a future transit line in the Tappan Zee corridor will have a harder time receiving funding. Although other specific transit program reductions are not yet known, at the very least this appropriation will set a bad precedent and reduce the federal share of funding for pending projects critical to our transit system and future economic growth.

We strongly urge all members of Congress from New Jersey, New York and Connecticut to oppose this bill, and win amendments to it.

The Tri-State Transportation Campaign web site:

[www.tstc.org](http://www.tstc.org)

## Downstate NY Project Listings Available

A draft of the big list of transportation capital projects anticipated for the 2004-2006 period in the lower Hudson Valley, New York City and Long Island, known as the "Transportation Improvement Program," is available on-line from the NY Metropolitan Transportation Council.

Separate files list in detail the projects likely to be undertaken during the next several years by NY State DOT regional offices, county public works departments, MTA operating agencies and other public authorities like the NY State Thruway. Go to the "Transportation Improvement Program" section at [www.nymtc.org](http://www.nymtc.org) to find the files.

## Calendar

**July 24, Noon** NYC Transit Riders Council monthly meeting. Discussion of the AirTrain. 347 Madison Ave., 5th floor. Manhattan. 212-878-7097. [www.pcac.org](http://www.pcac.org)

**July 29 4-8pm.** Tappan Zee Bridge/I-287 environmental review. "Round 2 workshop." NY Power Authority, 123 Main St., White Plains. 917-339-0488, [www.tzbsite.com](http://www.tzbsite.com).

**July 29, 6pm,** Auto-Free NY meeting, "Achieving Consensus for Regional Transportation Investments," Tom Schulze, director, NYMTC. 104 Washington St. [www.auto-free.org](http://www.auto-free.org). 212-475-3394.

**July 30, 9am.** Metropolitan Transportation Authority board meeting. 347 Madison Avenue, 5th floor. Manhattan. 212-878-7440.

**July 30 4-8pm.** Tappan Zee Bridge/I-287 environmental review. "Round 2 workshop." Palisades Center, Adler Room. 1000 Palisades Center Drive, West Nyack. 917-339-0488, [www.tzbsite.com](http://www.tzbsite.com).

**August 26 6-8pm.** Guided tour of Hudson-Bergen light rail line. Auto-Free NY. Meet in Hoboken Terminal waiting room. [www.auto-free.org](http://www.auto-free.org). 212-475-3394.

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



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MTR#425 Contributing: 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](mailto:tstc@tstc.org)