

Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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NEWS

Secaucus Opening Will Stretch Already-Thin NJ Transit

On September 6th, the \$600 million Secaucus Transfer Station officially opened to weekend NJ Transit rail service. While the new station has long been supported by transit advocates, the opening raised questions about how **cash-strapped NJ Transit** will cope with the increased rail capacity.

The Secaucus Transfer connects 10 out of 11 NJ Transit lines and gives New Jersey train riders more freedom to travel within the state. For example, residents of Bergen and Passaic Counties will now be able to switch to take trains into Newark and points south, such as Newark Airport, New Brunswick, Princeton, Trenton and even Philadelphia. The transfer also enables Manhattan-bound commuters, who previously relied on a messy transfer at Hoboken to the PATH or ferry, with **direct NJ Transit train connection** into Midtown. For many commuters, the new transfer translates into a 20-minute time reduction in each direction.

Transit officials estimate that the station, once fully opened, will serve 7,500 people on weekdays, and 2,700 on the weekends. Many NJ Transit lines are **already at capacity**, and the agency has been relying for years on its capital budget to pay for day-to-day operating costs. The new Transfer station, although an extremely important link, may put even more stress on an already stretched system.

The Secaucus Transfer will provide regular week-day service when the downtown PATH tunnel resumes service to Manhattan. The **reopening of the PATH** will relieve some of the increased ridership NJ Transit lines have been experiencing since the World Trade Center attacks. However, no one knows yet how much job displacement and altered commute patterns and habits will affect the various travel markets that were disrupted in Sept., 2001. The bottom line for NJ Transit, in any case, is that the agency needs an **increased commitment** of operating resources from the **state legislature and Governor McGreevey**. ❖

Port Authority Moves to Start New Goethals Study

The Port Authority's board approved \$47 million for a new Goethals Bridge environmental impact statement last week. During 2003, the **Port Authority** has been meeting with various interested parties to discuss a new approach to the Goethals issue (see *MTR # 423*). It appears to focus more on **replacing the 76-year old Goethals** with a new bridge, as opposed to "twinning" the old span with a new one alongside it.

The **twin bridge plan**, which generated controversy for much of the 1990s, was rejected by the public and officials on Staten Island. They feared that added capacity at the crossing would **attract more traffic** onto the Staten Island Expressway, and that the bridge plan was part of a broader scheme to also widen the Expressway and develop the I-278 corridor into a higher-volume gateway into New York City and Long Island.

The Port Authority pledged numerous public hearings and a plan "where the public will develop the choice." However, a spokesperson also told the *Staten Island Advance* that the design of the project would proceed "alongside the EIS," an approach which, if legal, is likely to at least **limit scope for public input**. The PA's ambitious timetable is to finish an EIS by 2006 and start construction in 2007. Its press release couched the project in part in language about national security. It is unclear whether construction can be financed from the agency's current capital program or whether it will seek new revenues sometime later this decade.

The Port Authority thinks the new concept will win more adherents. Spokespeople told reporters last week that year 2000 traffic projections from its mid-1990s EIS have already been surpassed. PA officials have declined to say how many lanes they anticipate on a new span, stating that that will be determined in the study. The new bridge would allow the agency to fix the Goethals' problem of too-narrow lanes, an inadequate bike/pedestrian path and possibly **add some mass transit** capacity in the poorly served Staten Island-New Jersey travel market. But the big issue will remain lane capacity — opposition to the "twin" plan was after all not about

The Tri-State Transportation Campaign web site:

www.tstc.org

the notion of a second bridge, but about the additional capacity that more lanes would provide. In this regard, a significantly wider bridge will not be essentially different than construction of the rejected Goethals twin. ❖

Gaffney's Last Gasp: Widen Roads

A recent *Newsday* overview of the NYMTC Transportation Improvement Program (see *MTR # 427*) noted that outgoing **Suffolk County Executive Robert Gaffney** had delayed its approval because it did not call for the **widening of NY Route 347** quickly enough.

The NY State DOT told the paper that it had made a firm commitment to Gaffney to accelerate the schedule of the project. However, with Gaffney's successor taking office in January, it is unclear how persistent the commitment will remain, or whether the project will be a priority. The **Long Island Association**, a major business group, is strongly in favor of widening the road and will lobby the next county executive on its behalf.

If construction begins on the DOT's current plan, Route 347 will be the **biggest highway expansion** project in downstate New York.

On the other hand, transportation reform groups and smart growth advocates say simply widening the road will not address the **root causes of traffic growth and congestion** in northern Brookhaven. They have called for a plan that will create links between various commercial parking lots, build a better local traffic grid and help re-shape the strip nature of the highway in Brookhaven into a more attractive place (*MTR # 269*). ❖

Ferry Briefs

Recently, there has been a significant amount of news about the ferry sector. A brief summary is presented below:

- ◆ Monthly and 10-trip **fares increased** by up to 15% on NJ-Manhattan NY Waterway service. NY Waterway says the fares were necessary to pay for recent capital improvements, increased fuel and insurance costs, and to make up for a recent loss in ridership.

- ◆ NY Water Taxi absorbed **Long Island City-Manhattan ferry service** after NY Waterway discontinued the service due to low ridership.

- ◆ The *Star Ledger* recently reported that come spring, ferry service will start from **Elizabeth, NJ to Lower Manhattan**.

- ◆ Staten Island is awaiting the arrival of **three new ferries** that are being constructed in Wisconsin. The ferries set sail on the Great Lakes Sept. 20 and travel via waterways to NYC. A DOT spokesman told the *SI Advance* that the ferries should be in service by next spring. ❖

Weehawken Terminal Plan

Forgets Pedestrians

Citizens at an August public hearing on construction of a new ferry terminal in Weehawken questioned the project's **accommodation of pedestrians**, the disabled, and local residents, and wondered why NJ Transit was paying for a terminal its light rail trains would only serve with difficulty.

The **Port Imperial** terminal is designed to replace the existing NY Waterway ferry operation near Pershing Road. The existing facility has limited capacity for expansion in not structurally suited for long-term use. The new one, to be located 1,500 feet north of the existing terminal, has a 31,000 square-foot footprint and is expected to cost \$25 million. NJ Transit is building and will own the terminal. It will be used by NY Waterway.

The existing terminal supports 7,000 daily commuters, far more than the 4,000 who used it prior to September 11, 2001. By 2010, daily **eastbound ridership is expected to grow to 8,600**. The new ferry terminal, which can accommodate four 400-passenger boats and can serve 1,200 people per hour, will include a main level for passenger services and an upper level for administrative and crew functions.

While few oppose more ferry capacity in itself, many at the hearing raised important concerns about **access and public accountability**. The project is designed to be accessible from the Hudson-Bergen light rail line, bus, jitney, and auto, but is not being designed with pedestrians in mind. The plans include pedestrian lane striping, a traffic signal, and a walkway between the terminal and a 1,500-space parking deck. They do not, however, include walkways for pedestrians coming from surrounding neighborhoods. Weehawken residents could be forced to "double" pay – first for the bus, then for the ferry.

Commuters arriving from the **Hudson-Bergen Light Rail Line** may also confront an uncomfortable transfer. The proposed light rail station is located 840 feet from the edge of the terminal property, which hardly constitutes a seamless transfer. Douglas Bern, chair of the Transit Committee of Bergen County, commented that commuters would have to cross two rail tracks and walk on an uncovered path for 1,200 feet in order to board a ferry. The distance would particularly impede handicapped riders.

These issues caused residents of Weehawken to doubt that the **project would truly benefit them**, as the local zoning code requires. Beyond the matter of getting to the station, residents pointed out that a one-way trip from Weehawken to New York costs \$5.00, the most expensive trip in the system per mile

(Waterway is also raising fares — see story on previous page). Attendees also questioned the propriety of using public funding for a terminal that will be used only NY Waterway. They raised the fact that the company is currently under investigation for its billing practices post-September 11 and for anti-competitive practices. ❖

SI Growth Panel Needs to Look at Big Picture

In July, Mayor Bloomberg announced the formation of the Staten Island Growth Management Task Force - consisting of various city commissioners, elected officials, industry gurus, and civic leaders - to **address growth and development on Staten Island**. While the creation of such a group is potentially good news for the congested island, a recent “downzoning” recommendation from the task force could end up hurting, rather than helping the situation.

The Task Force recently recommended a **massive re-zoning plan** for areas from Westerleigh to New Dorp. The rezoning would affect 68,000 lots, reducing their allowable density, making attached homes illegal and detached homes the norm. The move is in response to rapid, uncontrolled development on the Island that has strained infrastructure and threatened quality of life.

But a potential problem with downzoning is that it is a **band-aid solution** for a larger problem. Staten Island’s problem is not density. It is too much unplanned, medium-density development. A better solution is to create **growth centers** with increased housing density and commercial uses to focus the Island’s economic development where it most makes sense. At best, comprehensive downzoning will **freeze the existing land use pattern** and concomitant traffic nightmare in place, but not offer any improvement. Because of its low density, much of the Island is **hard to serve by public transit**, so traffic has become unbearable even during off peak hours.

While everyone surveying the S.I. streetscape says it needs more and **better mass transit**, the Island’s de-centered nature does not lend itself to intensive transit investment. Without any centers, a good mass transit system is simply not feasible. For example, a **bus rapid transit system** could efficiently link Staten Island neighborhoods to appropriately dense commercial nodes, but such a system will be **difficult to plan** without the identification of such growth zones.

Another problem with downzoning too much of S.I. is that it could end up producing an **affordable housing crisis**, excluding lower income families. Already, Staten Island is much wealthier than the

other four boroughs, with a median household income of almost \$57,000, versus a NYC average below \$39,000. If economic growth requires Staten Island to depend on a mixed income work force, exclusionary zoning could create an increasing segment of “reverse commuters” who may need to drive to the Island from Brooklyn, New Jersey or elsewhere, further contributing to traffic woes.

The Growth Management Task Force has received a load of media attention, especially from the Staten Island *Advance*. *Advance* coverage has brought to light important issues, such as some developers’ **build-anywhere methods** and the need for a moratorium on new development until the Task Force has completed recommendations. However, the paper’s editors, on occasion, seem caught in a 1950s planning style that is unrealistic for the fastest growing borough of New York City. The paper has repeatedly referred to one task force member’s comment that a goal of the Task Force is to “stop the erosion of the American Dream in Staten Island” and said downzoning to single family units will help achieve this. One editorial dismissed affordable housing concerns: “In the past, with earlier downzoning efforts, some (City Planning) commissioners have expressed reservations about Staten Island officials trying to keep out “affordable housing”.... Let’s hope the impetus Mayor Bloomberg has given to the effort will pre-empt such ideological drivel this time around.”

The reality is that, unless it wishes to choke off growth altogether, parts of Staten Island will have to **grow “up” rather than “out.”** Room is running out for low-density housing and scattered office building or parks. The way to preserve existing residential neighborhoods while accommodating some population and job growth is to establish some **denser, well-planned, mixed use (and mixed income) urban centers** that can be well served by transit.

The re-zoning plan will likely be approved by the end of the year. Zoning amendments were already approved in February 2002 to control road, sidewalks, and front yard widths on Staten Island. Further down the road, the Task Force will reportedly look at other zoning regulations, such as parking regulations and other density issues. ❖

Mobilizing Our Office !

The Tri-State Campaign has relocated to new offices. Our new address is:

**350 West 31st Street #802
New York, NY 10001**

Our telephone and fax numbers and internet address are unchanged.

Millstone EIS Fatally Flawed

With the deadline for public comment now expired, NJ DOT is currently reviewing public reaction to its draft environmental impact statement (DEIS) for the **controversial Millstone Bypass project in central New Jersey**. The document analyzes nineteen road-based alternatives for addressing “traffic congestion, mobility constraints, and safety concerns” on U.S. 1 and the Penns Neck area of West Windsor Township.

Contradicting common practice, **DOT failed to choose a “preferred” alternative among the nineteen options**. As a result, area residents and concerned citizens have been denied a meaningful opportunity to comment on the agency’s decision. The agency will issue a final environmental impact statement – which will choose among the alternatives – and then make a final decision without additional public input.

Dubiously, DOT claims it wanted to receive public input before choosing a preferred alternative. In fact, the DEIS is riddled with the **agency’s biases towards options that include building new roads like the Millstone Bypass**.

These flaws include:

- ◆ Reliance on a faulty 1998 Congestion Management Study that erroneously dismissed options like bus rapid transit that could reduce single occupant vehicle (SOV) trips.
- ◆ Failure to consider alternatives that primarily serve the “reduce mobility constraints” or “safety” purposes of the project. Instead, the agency emphasized short term congestion relief over mobility and safety. Almost all the traffic performance measures utilized focus on congestion.
- ◆ Failure to perform a smart growth analysis.
- ◆ Use of inaccurate interpretations of the State Plan to bolster options that include the Millstone Bypass and denigrate smart-growth options, like alternative “D.2.” For example, DOT claims that the Plan’s transportation policy #19 “encourages the use of limited access bypass roads” like the Millstone Bypass, when in fact, the policy states that this is the case only if there are no other feasible alternatives and the road can be built to minimize impacts. ❖

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



Mobilizing the Region

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Calendar

September 15, 6:30pm, Bronx Truck Route Rule Hearing, Hunts Point Branch Public Library, gbogacza@dot.state.ny.us, 718-482-4356

September 16, 5:30pm, Women's Transportation Seminar, "Reopening PATH at WTC," Speaker: Tony Cracchiolo, Director of Priority Capital Programs, Port Authority. Club 101, Corner of Park Ave and 40th Street, 718-277-8100, ext. 159, rsvp@wtsgny.org

September 16, 6pm, “Finding Chinatown: Current Transportation Studies,” NY Metro APA Chapter, 110 William St Conference Center, 4th Floor, <http://www.nyplanning.org>, 212-228-7875.

September 24, 6pm, Public meeting on MTA South Ferry Terminal Project, Alexander Hamilton US Custom House, One Bowling Green, Lower Level Auditorium, www.mta.info

September 29, 11am, Grand Opening and Dedication Ceremony for Senator Frank Lautenberg Transportation Opportunity Center, 32 Spruce Street, Paterson, NJ, 973-225-0555.

October 21, 6:30pm, West Harlem Environmental Action 15th Anniversary Celebration, International House, 500 Riverside Drive, NYC, 212-961-1000, www.weact.org

October 23-24, 10am, "How to Turn a Place Around," Sponsored by Project for Public Spaces, Various locations. For more info, contact Jande Wintrob, jwintrob@pps.org, 212-620-5660.

October 29, 8:30am, 4th Annual Tri-State Transit Symposium, Sponsored by NYU Wagner Rudin Center for Transportation. Kimmel Center, Rosenthal Pavilion, 60 Washington Square South, izp200@nyu.edu, 212-998-7545.

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