

Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

Number 438

November 24, 2003

NEWS

NJ Panel Calls for 12.5-Cent Gas Tax Hike

New Jersey's commission on transportation finance, appointed by Governor McGreevey, issued its report this morning, calling for a **12.5-cent increase** in the state gas tax. The commission calls for increasing the NJDOT and NJ Transit combined annual capital program to \$3.1 billion, \$520 million more than the FY2004 level. The additional money would pay for infrastructure repair, but could also be used for a road capacity program designed to "alleviate heavy traffic." It also calls for occasional NJ Transit fare increases. Over ten years, the commission recommends spending:

- \$1 billion to rehab 15,000 highway lane-miles.
- \$7 billion to eliminate the bridge repair backlog.
- \$4.9 billion to restore the NJ Transit system to state-of-good-repair.
- \$360 million for rail freight improvements.
- \$5.5 billion to "alleviate heavy traffic."

The *Asbury Park Press* has launched a campaign against any increase in New Jersey's gas tax, urging citizens to mail in coupons and otherwise contact Governor McGreevey to "deliver some choice words" against a tax hike increase. The paper says there is too much waste and corruption in state government to warrant a major increase.

Other newspapers have been more circumspect about the issue. The *Star-Ledger* has stated broad support for raising **more money for transportation**, while warning against a piecemeal approach that has the state coming back to citizens for revenue increases every few years. The *Courier-News* noted that New Jersey has a relatively low state gas tax, but raised a number of questions about how the money will be used: Which projects? Repair or new construction? Where are the details?

The commission report may be a starting point for the answers, but it is unclear for now how much of its recommendations Governor McGreevey will embrace, what other revenue will be needed to meet the commission's spending targets and what sort of transit fare increases it is really looking at. Critically important is whether a spending plan offered to the public will be guaranteed by including it in the **constitutional amendment** to dedicate the new revenue to the state transportation trust fund. ❖

West Street Ramp-Way Condemned

Advocacy groups, lower Manhattan residents and public officials want the NY State Dept. of Transportation to **bury its proposal to build a tunnel** on West Street where it abuts the World Trade Center site. Last Wednesday, NYSDOT presented three alternatives for the reconstruction of West Street, including shoring up the existing six-lane roadway (the "no build" option), an eight-lane surface roadway, and a \$900 million tunnel. NYSDOT did not answer questions in public nor specify whether or not the "public meeting" was in fact a formal EIS scoping hearing. However, it did allow an open forum for public comment, as opposed to the "infomercial" format used in June (*MTR #422*) where a stenographer and tape recorder took private statements from interested parties.

Testimony against the tunnel plan cited its **very high cost** and said it would not lead to a significant improvement in **pedestrian safety or access**. "We call the short tunnel the 'Ramp-way' because its series of depressed ramps will actually make it harder for many to cross West Street," said NYPIRG's Gene Russianoff. Others looked for traffic calming elements to make the street more of a boulevard, and urged that a six-lane option be considered as a real option, not just a pro-forma no-build option.

Fewer than five citizens said the tunnel option was worth considering further. The great majority of speakers, including representatives for **Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver**, Manhattan Borough President C. Virginia Fields and Assemblywoman Deborah Glick criticized the tunnel and called for an at-grade project. Many expressed concern that the state has prejudged the project and is being driven by unseen advocacy by downtown business groups.

Those following the EIS process remain concerned about NYSDOT's plan to supplement the Route 9A environmental impact statement from 1994, inadequate public notice and murky proceedings around project scoping. ❖

The Tri-State Transportation Campaign web site:

www.tstc.org

Families Dissent on PATH's Downtown Return

The return of PATH riders to the World Trade Center station yesterday was marked by protests by members of 9/11 victims' families against retention of the World Trade Center name and concern that the PATH operation is having too great an impact on the former twin towers' building footprints. According to the **U.S. Register of Historic Places**, the Coalition of 9/11 Families has requested that the U.S. Secretary of the Interior make an emergency declaration that the World Trade Center site is an historic landmark.

Such an emergency declaration is not a formal power held by the Secretary, but the move could be an attempt to intervene in the final design of PATH operations and the permanent station at the site.

The **Port Authority** has returned PATH service to the site 16 months after the September, 2001 attacks, and **earning praise** from many quarters in yesterday's ceremony and news coverage. ❖

Brooklyn Transit Needs: On the Map?

The NY State Assembly convened a hearing at Brooklyn Borough Hall last week to address the borough's mass transit needs. **Richard Brodsky**, State Assembly's Corporations Committee chair, pressed witnesses to make specific recommendations for short- and long-term improvements. Key testimony was provided by **Carolyn Konheim** of Community Consulting Services, co-author of "Better Transit for Brooklyn," a comprehensive report released in 2001 (see *MTR* #421). The paper has essentially set the agenda for transit investment needs in Brooklyn.

Katherine Lapp, MTA Executive Director, and Lawrence Reuter, NYC Transit president, mainly discussed budget constraints and benefits to Brooklyn from existing capital projects and recent initiatives such as TransitChek promotion and CityTicket, which will enable city transit riders to use commuter rail service within the city cheaply on weekends.

Probably the easiest of the CCS recommendations is **instituting street transfers** between nearby, non-intersecting stations without payment of a new fare (such as the G-7 transfer in Long Island City). Improving several subway lines and providing additional bus service would provide needed support to Downtown Brooklyn economic development initiatives. A longer-term priority is to **reevaluate existing bus routes** with extensive community input. Longer-term strategies are new station escalators, physical connections between formerly competing subway lines and real-time bus and train arrival information. Brooklyn's elected officials have about a year to put these issues on the radar screen before the MTA adopts a new five-year capital program. ❖

Lower Transit Costs for NJ State Employees

To little public attention, the McGreevey Administration last Tuesday announced the start of a new program that offers the **federal mass transit commuter benefit** to state employers.

The move puts New Jersey in league with the State of Connecticut, City of New York and Westchester County as a tri-state region public sector employer offering the transit benefit.

At no cost to transit providers such as NJ Transit, the commuter benefit program (largely administered in our region as **TransitChek**), a part of federal tax law, allows employees to use up to \$100 per month (\$1,200 per year) in pre-tax income to purchase transit fares. With a base salary of \$48,000, this can translate into employee **savings of up to \$400 a year**. The program will also produce direct savings for the New Jersey budget, because the state's payroll taxes will be reduced by the pre-tax spending.

The governor's Tuesday release contained supportive statements from state officials, NJ Transit and the Tri-State Campaign. Supporters hope the state action will lead more New Jersey employers to opt in to the program. Employees are only eligible for the benefit if their employers choose to participate in the program. A national survey found that employees with transit benefits were **twice as likely** to get to work by means other than solo driving (*MTR* #318).

The push to have New Jersey offer TransitChek to public employees took some time. A measure to offer the benefit began hearings in the NJ legislature during 2000. It was enacted in 2001 (*MTR* #325), but it has taken the NJ Treasury Dept. since then to set up implementation of the program. The measure makes about 76,000 state workers eligible for the transit benefit. ❖

Sprawl and the City

This occasional *MTR* column will track prominent development proposals with strong likelihoods of extending car-dependent sprawl development in the region, discuss the impacts of far-flung, unplanned development on cities and towns, and illustrate what cities can do to transform the sprawling landscape into more sustainable, liveable communities.

Episode One IKEA in Brooklyn? A Whole Lotta Parking

Big box stores have become a fact of life in the U.S. and elsewhere. Huge retailers like Wal-Mart, Home Depot, and Target have staked out a growing role in the global economy. At the same time, the ongoing march of the big boxes makes municipal and regional efforts to curb sprawl and begin to chart a new course extremely tough. The big boxes' attempts to get in on vibrant urban markets

presents its own set of problems. Unfortunately, some city governments are set to transplant the worst features of suburban sprawl directly into the urban midst.

A few years ago, an attempt to bring an IKEA to the edge of Brooklyn's Gowanus Canal was thwarted by community opposition. But IKEA is back. Earlier this year, the company began an environmental review for a store just a few miles away, on the Red Hook waterfront.

Why is IKEA so interested in this part of Brooklyn? According to the company, the north western section of Brooklyn houses the largest customer base for its Elizabeth, NJ store. So why not bring the store to its customers, rather than vice versa?

Fancy videos of the new store on ikearedhook.com indicate that the development is larger than most in this part of Brooklyn. The site is 22 acres and will house a 350,000 square foot store (the largest IKEA in the USA) with **1,400 parking spaces**. The company says 85% of 3 million annual visitors will arrive by car. This translates into almost 9,000 vehicles per day, not including delivery and freight trucks. IKEA says that the other 15% will take advantage of a ferry from downtown Manhattan, which can transport up to 400 people per hour, and shuttle buses to subways at 4th Avenue, Smith St. and Borough Hall. IKEA will pay for these and infrastructure improvements to the BQE and Hamilton Avenue. IKEA claims the development will reduce current truck volumes to the site by half, but community leaders question the accuracy of this statistic. More extensive traffic studies are underway by IKEA consultant, the Sam Schwartz Company. Hopefully, these will indicate how a Brooklyn IKEA would affect traffic locally and regionally, including at Hudson and East River crossings.

The Red Hook Civic Association (RHCA), the Park Slope Chamber of Commerce, Sunset Park Business Improvement District, Care About the Slope and others are against the project. They cite traffic and say IKEA is an inappropriate use for some of NYC's most beautiful waterfront. John McGettrick of RHCA also says Red Hook will see **thousands of new vehicle trips** due a new Fairway, a new Loews, a possible passenger terminal, and Gowanus Expressway reconstruction. He says this traffic future does not bode well for Red Hook, a struggling community that has successfully attracted new small businesses and artist centers.

Red Hook East and West Tenants Association and certain business interests are for the project, mainly attracted to the 500-600 new jobs it will produce. Community Board 6 and local politicians have yet to take a vocal stance on the issue.

From a transportation reform point of view, even

if the IKEA plan does avoid some trips between NYC and Elizabeth or Hicksville, it is too car oriented. The site plan, with its massive parking lot and wide roads, is little different than the one abutting the NJ Turnpike. Why not choose a site with **no new parking** near downtown Brooklyn, for example, and offer affordable delivery for NYC customers? Far less parking and more extensive bikeways, parks, and impact development fees could also go a long way to improving the proposed Red Hook plan. It is unlikely that a three-seat lime green sofa will fit into a regular car or SUV anyway.

The IKEA case raises broad city planning questions. Why can't big boxes in Brooklyn or edge cities work more as they do in Manhattan? Stores like the Herald Square Macy's, Penn Station's K-Mart, and Crate & Barrel prove that big box does not necessarily mean big parking or out-of-scale footprints.

In favor of improving IKEA's plan is that the company markets itself as "green," and is clearly self-conscious about its public image. Perhaps it can be led to show that big-box is not necessarily married to the worst features of sprawl.

The NYC Dept. of City Planning press office says the IKEA plan is undergoing environmental review and will begin the official city process in early 2004. This process takes about 7-9 months, but extended controversy over this project could draw it out for much longer. IKEA's website says that it hopes to

Orangetown Sustainable Development Plan Ready to Go

A recent American Planning Association forum charted the progress of NYMTC's Hudson Valley sustainable development strategies and highlighted the need for a **long term commitment** to the projects. Studies for Route 303 in Rockland and Routes 6/35/202 in Westchester are finished; studies for Brooklyn's Coney Island and Long Island's East End are still underway. Each effort uses community consensus to develop future plans for land use and transportation and takes about 2-3 years.

The farthest along of the Hudson Valley efforts is the Orangetown study, which includes the neighborhoods of Tappan, Orangeburg/Blauvelt, and Bradley Parkway along the **Route 303** corridor in Rockland County. The strategy largely focuses on encouraging a mix of uses by reducing large retail, instituting traffic calming, reducing road widths, and generally improving quality of life. (For the detailed plan, see www.orangetown.com). Originally, the state DOT had planned to widen Rte. 303. Planning was completed about a year ago, and the next step is a DOT access management study to look at technical requirements associated with changes such as widening medians and making changes at intersections.

The town has already upgraded signs, reduced speed limits and implemented a zoning rule to restrict retail development to 65,000 feet.

Despite this solid plan, the Town can only do so much without **more money from the NY State DOT**. So far, DOT has not allocated money to follow through with the strategy's findings. The funding would pay for capital improvements, such as reducing lane widths, building bikeways and better walkways, and widening medians.

Local officials, such as Orangetown Supervisor Thom Kleiner, believe it is important to follow a good strategic process with **actual results** and set a positive example for the sustainable development strategies throughout the region. Other towns will be less likely to take this type of process —which has pioneered the joint development of town zoning plans with state transportation investment priorities — seriously if no tangible results come out of the ones that are already completed.

APA's forum also highlighted how dependent these types of studies are on the local political environment. In Orangetown, for example, newly elected officials want to allow big box stores, such as Wal-Mart, in the newly designated zoning overlay district (which restricts retail to 65,000 feet, far smaller than the average Wal-Mart). The *Journal News* opined last week against this option, saying, "The Route 303 overlay zone provides for such good planning as hotels, such as the Holiday Inn in Orangeburg. These are ratables that do not bring constant traffic and trucking. A big-box retailer on Route 303, such as WalMart, would create even more traffic on a road already too saturated."

In response to this and similar political situations throughout the region, speakers at the APA forum highlighted the importance of having a **local champion** and building a large, community based stakeholder group to push the strategy along, no matter who is in office.

Links to the sustainable development strategies:
Rockland, Route 303: www.orangetown.org
Westchester, Route 6/35/202: www.202and6.com
Long Island East End: www.seedsproject.com
Coney Island:
nyc.gov/html/dot/html/motorist/gravesend.html

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



Mobilizing the Region

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Calendar

Dec. 2, 6:30-8:30pm. NYS DOT open house for Kosciuszko Bridge project. Automotive High School, 50 Bedford Avenue, Brooklyn, NY. (718) 482-4683, www.dot.state.ny.us/reg/r11/kosciuszko/kosciuszkohome.html.

Dec. 2, 4:30-9pm. Multi-agency Comprehensive Port Improvement Plan (CPIP) Public Scoping Meeting, Elizabeth City Hall, 50 Winfield Scott Plaza, Elizabeth, NJ. (866) 877-2747, nepacoordinator@cpipeis.com, www.cpiponline.org.

Dec. 3, 6pm. Community Liaison Committee, South Brooklyn Transportation Investment Study, 25 4th Ave (above Pacific St. subway), Brooklyn. www.southernbrooklyn.com. 212-799-8803 x24.

Dec. 4, 11:45am-2pm. Transportation Research Forum luncheon forum on International Trade Flow Study. Giovanni's Atrium, 100 Washington Street, Manhattan. (212) 435-4226, pgessner@panynj.gov. \$

Dec. 4, 4:30-9pm. Multi-agency Comprehensive Port Improvement Plan (CPIP) Public Scoping Meeting, East Side High School, 238 Van Buren Street, Newark, NJ. (866) 877-2747, nepacoordinator@cpipeis.com, www.cpiponline.org.

Dec. 8, 11am-2pm and 5-8pm. Access to the Region's Core (ARC) scoping meeting on NJ-NY passenger rail tunnel project, NJ location TBA. (973) 491-7959 or (212) 435-4421, www.accesstotheregionscore.com.

Dec. 9, 4:30-9pm. Multi-agency Comprehensive Port Improvement Plan (CPIP) Public Scoping Meeting, Police Athletic League's Miccio Center, 110 West 9th St., Brooklyn, NY. (866) 877-2747, www.cpiponline.org.

Dec. 10, 11am-2pm and 5-8pm. Access to the Region's Core (ARC) scoping meeting on NJ-NY passenger rail tunnel project, NY location TBA. (973) 491-7959 or (212) 435-4421, www.accesstotheregionscore.com.

Dec. 10, 6:30pm. Gowanus Community Stakeholder Group meeting. UPROSE, 166A 22nd Street between 3rd and 4th Avenues, Brooklyn. Mike Cairl at michael.cairl@verizon.net or www.gowanus-tunnel.org.

more calendar entries at www.tstc.org