

Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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NEWS

NJ DOT Working to Shrink Capital Program

In the aftermath of Governor Jim McGreevey's December declaration that he would not seek an increase in the state gas tax, voices are already being raised decrying **New Jersey's dwindling transportation resources**.

A *Trenton Times* editorial last Wednesday recounted a proposal to improve conditions along Route 1 in Mercer and Middlesex Counties, including measures to accommodate and protect cyclists and pedestrians. But the piece pointed out that any work on the recommendations will be **impossible without money in the state's transportation bank** — the NJ Transportation Trust Fund — to pay for it. The paper hoped the governor would revisit the transportation finance issue in his state of the state speech, but was disappointed.

Instead, New Jersey transportation commissioner Jack Lettiere told reporters he is about a month away from issuing a plan to **delay and cancel transportation projects** that the state's pinched transport budget can't afford. It is not clear whether the cuts will also extend to NJ Transit projects.

Transportation funding in the Garden State is apparently stretched so thin, with operating and capital budgets increasingly blended, that Lettiere is scrambling to maintain sufficient capital spending to **keep the state qualified** for the full share of **federal money** allotted to it, according to the *Bergen Record*. Federal transportation aid, which is all for construction projects or equipment purchases, requires a certain amount of state or local matching funds (generally 20% of a project's cost). ❖

Outgoing NJ Lawmakers Enact Safety Reforms

New Jersey legislators wrapping up the post-election lame duck session tightened several traffic safety laws. It enacted \$250 fines for drivers who commit moving violations while talking on a hand-held cell phone.

The legislature also finally adopted the federal .08 blood alcohol limit as the threshold for drunk driving. The federal government adopted the standard in 1998. NJ has foregone several million dollars in federal aid each year since because of its failure to act until now. ❖

Proposed Medallion Sale

Could be Recipe for Gridlock

The 900 additional taxi medallions that the Bloomberg administration seeks to issue would add the equivalent of 27,000 commuter cars to Manhattan streets each day, according to one analysis. Most analysts who have looked at the **NYC Taxi & Limousine Commission's** draft environmental impact statement say it **deals with likely impacts in only cursory ways**, failing to quantify them and propose adequate mitigation measures. It seems odd that Mayor Bloomberg, who has tried to tackle painfully slow Midtown Manhattan traffic speeds with initiatives like the "Thru Streets" plan (*MTR #386*), would risk making conditions considerably worse. However, the city's political leaders (and editorial boards) appear to believe that expanding the taxi supply appeals to some populist instinct and subscribe to the common wisdom that you can never find a cab.

But where the NYC Taxi & Limousine Commission's draft environmental impact statement (DEIS) for the medallion sale treats the issue of congestion impacts only vaguely, work by transportation analyst Charles Komanoff for the New York Taxi Workers Alliance says the effect could be dramatic. Because **the average medallion taxi logs roughly 30 times as many miles** in the Manhattan central business district per day or year as does the average private auto, adding 900 medallions without worsening traffic would require eliminating approximately 27,000 private cars from entering and/or operating within this area.

Komanoff calculated that the presence of 900 additional taxicabs will tack an additional 4%, on average, onto the time required for motor vehicles — not just yellow cabs but also other for-hire vehicles, private autos, vans, buses and trucks of all sizes — to make their journeys in Manhattan south of 96th Street. Translating the 4% prolongation of vehicular trips into lost minutes and hours results in **18 million hours a year in lost time** for Manhattan motorists and passengers.

Based on standard estimates of the value of time for different types of vehicles and their occupants, the time costs to motorists of the additional gridlock that will be created by 900 new medallion taxicabs

can be expected to total \$480 million a year, not including additional bridge and tunnel congestion, pedestrian delays, air and noise pollution and other costs. Komanoff said that cost far outweighed the value of the new taxi trips that would be available in Manhattan.

The Taxi & Limousine Commission's DEIS does not quantify the congestion consequences of expanding the cab fleet, but says the extra traffic can be accommodated by traffic signal re-timing and restriping the lanes on some Midtown streets. The city's consultant at a recent public hearing said a taxi fare increase would also provide some mitigation of traffic growth vs. simply adding 900 medallions at current fare levels.

Cab drivers at the hearings said more cabs will worsen rush hour traffic, and that there isn't demand for more cabs at other times.

Consultant Antonia Bryson testified on behalf of a group of major environmental groups, noting that the DEIS contained **no consideration of the additional taxis' impacts on transit, pedestrian and goods movement**. She also noted that the DEIS states that in 1999, cabs spent 271 million miles cruising empty, searching for passengers. More cab stands have long been seen as a way to impart more efficiency to the industry, but the city has not acted on it except at transportation hubs. Bryson also argued that the DEIS took an inadequate look at the proposal's air pollution consequences.

Some suggested that taxi company shift changes are now often inconveniently scheduled during rush hours, when demand for cabs is greatest, and that some of the reported demand/supply imbalance with taxis can be alleviated with simple procedural changes by the companies. News reports last week suggested that the Bloomberg Administration is considering a **\$1 rush hour cab fare surcharge**, along with a 25% basic fare increase, but the mayor appears undaunted by the prospect of significantly worsening Manhattan traffic congestion.

During the recent debate, Transportation Alternatives released a report backing higher cab fares, saying **better paid drivers will be safer**. The paper argues that better paid cab drivers will drive fewer hours (and thus be better rested) and not drive as fast and recklessly as low-wage driver trying to cram in more and more fares. Transportation expert Bruce Schaller performed the analysis, using data from the last decade that showed drivers making more per shift were involved in fewer crashes. The last NYC cab fare increase was in 1996. News reports have indicated that a majority of NYC Taxi and Limousine commissioners may be leaning toward a fare increase. ❖

Bloomberg Looks to Private Bus Transfer, Not Tolls, for 2005 Savings

According to its 2005 budget, New York City is still looking to save \$150 million by transferring the **seven bus companies supported by city subsidies** to NYC Transit next fiscal year, the Straphangers Campaign reported this week.

Transit advocates support the consolidation, but **want the city to maintain financial support** unless some new source of revenue can be secured to support the bus service. Forcing the MTA to suddenly shoulder the burden of the franchise buses' operation will result in **further budget pressure on the MTA**, likely accompanied by service cuts for riders using the lines.

The city also provides about 5% of NYC Transit's operating fund with its \$250 million annual contribution. The MTA faces budget woes and possible fare hikes in the next few years — any reduction from city or state sources that support NYC Transit could exaggerate these problems and further transfer the cost to riders.

Mayor Bloomberg also officially announced in his budget address last week that he was **officially ending his quest to institute tolls** on the Brooklyn, Manhattan and Williamsburg bridges.

Bloomberg first floated the toll plan, which experts estimated would have raised at least \$600 million in annual revenue and eliminated as much as 9% of New York City's traffic gridlock, shortly after taking office in early 2002. But he never launched an effort to muster political or popular support to overcome strident opposition from officials representing Brooklyn and Queens, and did not take practical steps toward toll implementation.

The Bridge Tolls Advocacy Project, a pro-tolls group, released a statement on the announcement. "Bloomberg gets an 'A' for vision but an 'F' for follow-through," said economist and Bridge Tolls founder Charles Komanoff. ❖

Downtown Brooklyn Big Development Plans: Where's the Transportation?

A rowdy crowd of about 300 attended a hearing last week on the Downtown Brooklyn rezoning plan.

A variety of industry, labor, political, and community representatives weighed in. A number of the speakers, including State Senator Velmanette Montgomery, stated that the plan would negatively impact the community by displacing residents and **overwhelming the transportation system**.

The plan would increase densities in downtown Brooklyn south to about Atlantic Avenue and east roughly to Flatbush Ave., including the areas currently designated as Urban Renewal areas by the Atlantic Terminal and the Brooklyn Academy of

Music. It would add over 4 million square feet of commercial and residential space initially (about the size of MetroTech), with millions of square feet of additional development possible under the “full build out” scenario.

City planning reps said that additional mass transit demand may be handled by a variety of **station upgrades** and other improvements to the transit network, such as connecting the Jay and Lawrence Street stations in 2006. Traffic woes are supposed to be addressed mainly by closing certain streets and widening others. But city planners concede that the development envisioned in the new zoning plan **will inevitably worsen congestion** downtown.

Community Consulting Services, a local planning group, said the draft environmental impact statement **looks at only a fraction of likely downtown development**, and understates transportation impacts for the area it does analyze. They argue that a full 40 million square feet of new development is likely, and that the new jobs, residences and attractions the development will bring will create demands on the mass transit system, streets and highways that today’s capacity cannot accommodate.

Most people agree that **a transportation plan for downtown Brooklyn is necessary**. The Downtown Brooklyn Council, Councilmember David Yassky, along with other politicians, Community Board 2, local businesses and community groups seem to agree that a harder look at transportation in connection with the big development plans is needed. Congressman Ed Towns is also championing a transportation study. The debate arises as to when to conduct it. Many city officials think that a transportation plan can wait, while the plan’s many critics say transportation plans — both for roadways and mass transit — should be integral to the rezoning and development proposals.

It’s worthwhile to contrast the downtown Brooklyn issues with the process the city has established to boost large-scale development on Manhattan’s fare West Side. In that case, direct mayoral involvement has led NYC Transit to become a partner in a major rezoning plan, **coupling it with studies of extending the #7 subway line**. The difference is that plenty of subway lines already traverse downtown Brooklyn and its environs. But if those lines are at or near capacity, the issue is nearly the same: is there sufficient room in the transportation system to support more intensive use of the area? ❖

The Tri-State Transportation Campaign web site:

www.tstc.org

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Calendar

January 17, 7:30pm. CT Metro-North SLE Rail Commuter Council. SACIA, One Landmark Square, Stamford CT. Info: (203) 655-0138, trains@camcomm.com; www.trainweb.org/ct.

January 20, 6-8:30pm. NYC DOT Truck Route Impact Reduction Study — Outreach Workshop for Brooklyn Community Boards 1-4. Beacon Center-Grand St. Campus Auditorium, corner Grand Street & Bushwick Ave. Info: (212) 944-2000 x6168, cdalesio@ekmail.com; www.nyc.gov/dot.

January 22, Noon. NYC Transit Riders Council, monthly meeting. 347 Madison Avenue, Manhattan. 5th floor. 212-878-7461.

January 22, 6-8:30pm. NYC DOT Truck Route Impact Reduction Study — Outreach Workshop for Brooklyn Community Boards 5, 8, 9, 13-18. Prospect Heights H.S., 883 Clason Ave. at Union St. 212-944-2000 x6168, cdalesio@ekmail.com;

Feb. 6, 9:30-12pm. CUNY University Transportation Research Center seminar: Transportation, Border Control, and Homeland Security. Baruch College, 151 East 25th Street, #750. seminars@utrc2.org; www.utrc2.org.

February 6, 2004. NJ DOT & [Alan M. Voorhees Transportation Center of Rutgers University](http://www.alanmvoorhees.org) sponsor “Common Ground,” an invitational leadership conference to advance walking, biking & healthy community design. Info: info@njsafety.org.

March 3-5, 2004. League of American Bicyclists' National Bike Summit in Washington, D.C. Info: www.bikeleague.org.

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

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