

# Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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## NEWS

### **Bonding Likely to Keep NJ Roads and Rails Out of Poorhouse**

News reports of the release of the NJ DOT and NJ Transit 2004 capital programs to metropolitan planning organizations suggest that Governor McGreevey's plan to issue \$900 million in new transportation bonds, **backed by future federal transportation aid**, will avoid the need for major program cuts over the next two years. However, NJ Transit will continue the practice of sacrificing a large proportion of needed capital spending in order to pay for day-to-day operations, a bad practice that could spell trouble and higher costs for NJ's bus and rail system down the road.

Before the bonding plan was hatched, New Jersey transportation commissioner Jack Lettiere had warned of a transportation austerity budget. While some planned road projects appear to have lengthened schedules, DOT officials said that had more to do with normal developments in the project pipeline than funding constraints. DOT and NJ Transit also appear to be eliminating 200 staff positions, mainly through attrition, though transit said they would not be positions affecting service. Lettiere told reporters that **basic infrastructure, bridges and rail lines would get highest priority** in the overall program. The Tri-State Transportation Campaign has not yet seen a copy of the draft plan, which will be sent to the state legislature after consideration by the metropolitan planning organizations.

#### **— NJ Transit capital depleted again —**

The *Star-Ledger* reported that the NJ Transit capital budget would transfer **\$356 million** to the agency's operating budget. That practice has been sustained for several years, and transit chief George Warrington has warned it is no way to run a railroad. Systems that defer standard upkeep often see deteriorating operating conditions, and almost always incur **higher future costs** because the lack of regular maintenance work leads to a higher rate of equipment and infrastructure replacement.

The bonding plan has been attacked by Republicans in the state legislature, who indicate they may propose their own funding plan, and by NJ editorial writers. No Democrats have emerged as critics of the scheme, however, which suggests it may well be destined for approval in Trenton this spring.

### **New York Panel Will Examine Transportation Finance**

NY State Transportation Commissioner Joseph Boardman told state senators last week he would convene and chair a new state commission to examine ways of paying for the state's roadway and mass transit infrastructure, according to the *Times Union*.

The commissioner said "transportation revenues are not growing to keep pace with the need," indicating that major capital investments would be needed to keep bridges, pavement and mass transit systems from deteriorating over the next decade.

The action and the commissioner's remarks may be a sign that the Pataki administration recognizes that new revenue will be needed to keep the MTA and other state transportation capital programs going. New taxes were enacted to underpin the reconstruction of downstate mass transit systems after their terrible decline in the 1960s and 1970s, and to shore up the highway system. However, no major transportation revenue sources have been enacted since the early 1990s, leading transportation systems to rely on fare increases and borrowing.

Recent experience with transportation advisory commissions in Connecticut and New Jersey suggests how New York should not proceed. The transportation strategy board created by **Governor John Rowland** in 2000 to meet an outcry over lousy transportation proven to be a **monumental head-fake**. It absorbed the attentions of would-be transportation reformers — from environmentalists to business leaders — for several years, but has not yielded any significant movement in transportation policy or investment levels. Overall, it increased cynicism about Rowland's regard for the importance of the issue. This has recently become magnified several-fold by the release of a state budget calling for further transit fare increases and weak levels of capital investment in the face of this winter's partial collapse of the New Haven commuter rail line.

**Governor James McGreevey** established a blue ribbon commission on transportation finance during 2003. It recommended raising more transportation revenue, greater levels of capital investment and less reliance on borrowing. Since the release of the commission's report, the governor has **proceeded to do exactly the opposite**. He fumbled a gas tax pro-

posal, set his agency leaders to work on a transportation austerity budget and is now proceeding to borrow nearly \$1 billion of transportation capital funds, earning condemnation from opinion makers in the process. A recent *Star-Ledger* editorial proclaimed that “the new borrowing does not solve anything. It merely buys McGreevey a year — at the expense of adding another \$100 million each year to the state's transportation bill. For those of you who visit the pumps, that's about 2 cents worth of gas tax hike right there.”

Commissioner Boardman said the New York State panel would be formed this spring, and would solicit input at hearings this summer.

### Transit, Not Road Projects, Suffers in CT

Last week, a bipartisan group of state legislators voiced their concerns about Connecticut's worsening neglect of mass transit in a press conference at the Milford station. Governor Rowland's 2005 budget proposes a 5.5% commuter rail fare hike and **reallocates \$8.3 million for new rail cars** to other projects. The money was meant to be a first payment toward a \$60 million purchase of 20 rail cars.

“Constantly increasing fees without reinvesting in Metro-North service will decrease the number of commuters who use the service, and contribute to the state's transportation problems,” Representative Themis Klarides told the *New Haven Register*. He was joined by House Majority Leader James Amann, Senator Win Smith and Representative Richard Roy.

Also last week, 42 CT lawmakers wrote to state officials pushing for new rail cars. Approximately one-third of rail cars on Metro-North's New Haven line were out of service in recent weeks because the antiquated fleet breaks down in certain snow and temperature conditions.

Meanwhile, Connecticut continues to invest heavily to expand roads. Its **state DOT** seems to be the **least reformed**, old-line paving outfit in the northeast. In North Branford, for instance, ConnDOT has allocated \$17 million since 2000 to widen a one mile portion of Route 80 from two lanes to three. The project will take 13 feet of the Town Green, which was established in 1724, and houses a historic church, burial ground, and nursery school. Community groups and town officials have created an alternative plan that expands the green and solves some traffic dilemmas. A DOT spokesperson told the *Register* that the community's plans may be incorporated after the project is complete. “Our project plans are essentially complete, and to go and do that work (first) we'd have to go back and redesign the (original) plan, which would cause delays,” he told the paper.

### Downtown PATH Ridership Swells

The number of PATH train riders using the World Trade Center site PATH station, which opened in November, has soared past expectations.

The Port Authority hoped the station would serve 24,000 average weekday riders by the end of the temporary station's first year, but in fact, it only took two weeks after the opening for downtown trains to attract that many. Weekday ridership then skyrocketed 18% between December and January, and now hovers around 36,000 riders.

The numbers represent riders' return to more normal mass transit commute patterns and the Port Authority's success in opening a temporary yet user-friendly station.

Before September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, the World Trade Center PATH served 67,000 a day. The agency expects that once the permanent PATH station is completed in 2006, PATH daily ridership will be around 80,000. Officials expect a completed downtown transit system, including the Fulton Street Transit Center, to eventually serve about 250,000 riders each day.

### Route 92 in Legislative Sights

Standing against a backdrop of Middlesex County farmland, two state legislators announced a bill to **cancel** proposed **construction of Route 92** last Wednesday. Introduced by State Senator Pete Inverso and Assemblyman Bill Baroni, both Republicans from the area, the legislation would revoke the Turnpike's authorization to build the 6.7-mile highway from Exit 8A to Route 1.

Residents and advocates have long opposed the project because it would induce sprawl development, and bring **an additional 10,000 cars** daily to already congested sections of Route 1.

On Wednesday, legislators also highlighted its steep cost: at \$400 million, Route 92 equals one third of the state's capital transportation budget for one year. If the project is cancelled, that funding could possibly be shifted to other uses, like fixing existing roads and bridges.

Given shortfalls in the state's transportation trust fund, and his anti-sprawl beliefs, Governor McGreevey should join with Route 92's foes. The governor recently announced plan to borrow \$900 million in transportation funds.

When the Army Corps of Engineers releases Route 92's draft environmental impact statement — expected in March or April — and decides whether to issue a permit for filling wetlands, McGreevey will have to take a stand on Route 92. Advocates, who recently praised NJ DOT's decision not to build the nearby Millstone Bypass — will view this decision as a litmus test of his commitment to smart growth.

## **Westchester Rider Rerieved by Tax Hike**

The prayers of Bee-Line bus riders have been answered for now.

Westchester County lawmakers gave bus riders and drivers a reprieve last week when they decided to boost county property taxes 18.8 %, thus sparing 42 of the 44 bus lines that Westchester transportation officials had planned to cut or eliminate service.

Come 2005, however, Bee-Line buses may be back on the chopping block. Next year's Bee-Line budget is already expected to be \$5 million short. Now Bee-Line's lifeline may have to come from increased funding from Albany. Westchester DOT Commissioner Larry Salley has strongly argued that Westchester gets less than its fare share of state transit funding compared to other smaller or mid-sized systems across New York, such as those on Long Island or in Buffalo.

The county legislature's willingness to stave off bus cuts is commendable, yet long term budget problems remain. Last year, the county proposed a similar service reduction – of 41 routes – and enacted a 25-50 % fare hike. Next year's deficit could lead to another round of proposed cuts. It should be noted that while the 55,000 people who use the Bee-Line system each day live in fear of one day losing their buses, investment in Metro-North and highways remains relatively stable. Many Bee-Line riders are low-income and have no alternative means to get to work and other important destinations.

Westchester County's propensity to look to fare hikes and service cuts to keep Bee-Line operating could prove fatal. Farebox revenue makes up about 50 percent of its operating budget. If drastic service cuts are made, fare revenue will drop, creating a "death spiral" of budget shortfalls, service cuts and fare increases that eventually run the system into the ground.

At Tuesday's hearings, bus riders and members of the Transport Workers Union pleaded for their livelihoods before the county transportation board, while representatives from big employers in the area, including IBM and Mastercard, said the cuts would remove a major incentive they had to locate in the region in the first place. The companies went so far as threatening to move if service is cut.

Salley said that in addition to more bus operating funds, the county also wants to find money for MetroCard equipment on Bee-Line buses. That would cost the system \$3 million a year, but would allow riders to make free transfers to NYC subways.

Two bus lines that operate only during the summer were not restored. They bring Bronx residents to work at Playland Amusement Park in Rye. Salley said the county parks department would arrange other means for these trips.

## **Brooklyn Analysts Say Downtown-LIRR Link Unworkable Without Subway Riders**

A new direct Long Island Rail Road connection to Lower Manhattan would rely on Brooklyn subway riders to make financial sense, according to a recent analysis by the planning group Community Consulting Services (CCS).

CCS found that the commuter rail extension under consideration could serve about 12,000 current Brooklyn subway riders, which could double the ridership projections for the route if it accommodates only suburban commuters and airport travelers. Potential Brooklyn ridership could further increase by up to 20,000 if the NBA Nets stadium complex and development implied by the downtown Brooklyn rezoning plan come to pass.

"The bottom line is that the cost of the new LIRR airport rail service greatly exceeds the travel time benefit unless it attracts a large number of subway users. Without Brooklyn riders, this plan doesn't work at all," Carolyn Konheim, chairwoman of CCS told the *Daily News*.

But in order for the commuter rail line to attract Brooklyn subway riders, its fare must be competitive with the subway's and make a number of stops in Brooklyn.

However, the main options outlined for study of the extension are more likely to displace Brooklyn subway riders rather than offer them new alternatives. Three out of the four plans for the rail link would use existing subway tunnels, and possibly reduce train capacity along some combination of the A, C, M, N and R lines (*MTR #446*).

## **Senate Approves Big Six-Year Funding Bill**

Following several days of lively debate, the full U.S. Senate last week passed the "Safe, Accountable, Flexible, and Efficient Transportation Equity Act" (SAFETEA – S. 1072) 76 to 21. SAFETEA provides \$318 billion (up slightly from the \$311 amount originally proposed and reported in *MTR #446*) in funding for road, bridge and transit projects and programs over six years, with \$255 billion going to roads and bridges and \$56 billion for public transportation. A massive set of amendments was added to the bill during the scramble to finish Thursday night. For the most part, these amendments were accepted without debate (or even the full name being read on the Senate floor). The confusion is expected to delay public release of the final bill text until sometime later this week.

### **— NY, CT Lose Funding, NJ Benefits —**

For New York and Connecticut, the Senate's "minimum guarantee" provision returning 95% of a state's gas tax receipts in the form of federal aid, means the states will see smaller increases in road

and bridge funding than all but four other states. Connecticut, whose infrastructure is struggling with years of underinvestment, will see only a 10 percent increase in road and bridge funding, compared to a 36 percent increase nationally. The big bright spot for New York is **Senator Chuck Schumer's success** in securing **\$7.1 billion in transit funding** for NY state, a 45 percent increase over the amount authorized under TEA-21. New Jersey, which was a federal "donor" state under the TEA-21 formula, would see a hike just above the national average.

— **House Panel Pledges Action in Early March** —

Debate on the House Transportation and Infrastructure (T&I) Committee's \$375 billion version of the bill, "TEA-LU," has not progressed beyond the introduction of a partial bill last November. The committee, however, is expected to take it up again in early March. Meanwhile, the House this week passed a four-month extension of the current funding bill, TEA-21, which originally expired at the end of September last year but was extended until the end of February. **Senate leaders** have said they will **oppose a four-month extension**, and instead force the House to accept a one-month extension as a way to maintain pressure to finish a bill before summer. The Senate will act on the extension when it reconvenes after the Presidents' Day recess.

The House bill, as far as it is known, does not address the 95% "minimum guarantee" that creates problems for states like Connecticut and New York. Alaska would not fare well under the formula approved by the Senate, and the T&I Committee is chaired by Alaska Congressman Don Young.

Eventually, the Senate's transportation bill will need to be reconciled with any House version that is finally approved. The main outstanding issue is money. Republican leaders don't want transportation funding levels to increase the federal deficit. **President Bush** has threatened to veto both the House and the Senate bills, and called the transportation bill "an **interesting test of fiscal discipline** on both sides of the aisle" on NBC's Feb. 8 *Meet the Press*. The President's reauthorization plan calls for \$256 billion over six years. House leadership has echoed the Bush Administration's concern, with House Majority Leader Tom DeLay adamantly opposed to the gas tax increase underpinning Young's proposal for \$375 billion.

The Tri-State Transportation Campaign web site:

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

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## Calendar

**Feb. 18, 3:30-5:30pm and 7-9pm.** [NY Metropolitan Transportation Council](#) Regional Transportation Plan Update. Staten Island Borough Hall, 2nd Floor Court Room, 10 Richmond Terrace. Info: (718) 472-3197 or [nymtc-rtp@dot.state.ny.us](mailto:nymtc-rtp@dot.state.ny.us).

**Feb. 18, 5-7pm.** NYC Transit Riders Council President's Forum: Subway Issues with Lawrence Reuter, MTA NYC Transit. 347 Madison Avenue, 5th Floor Board Room. Info: (212) 878-7087 or [mail@pcac.org](mailto:mail@pcac.org); [www.pcac.org](http://www.pcac.org).

**Feb. 19, 12pm.** Metro-North Railroad Commuter Council meeting. MTA Headquarters, 347 Madison Avenue, 10th Floor Conference Room. Info: (212) 878-7087, [mail@pcac.org](mailto:mail@pcac.org); [www.pcac.org](http://www.pcac.org).

**Feb. 19, 1:15pm.** NY Metropolitan Transportation Council meeting. NYS Department of Transportation office, Hunters Point Plaza, 47-40 21st Street, Room 820, Long Island City. Please RSVP to (718) 472-3293/3046. Info: [www.nymtc.org](http://www.nymtc.org).

**Feb. 19, 6:30-8:30pm.** [Kosciuszko Bridge](#) Stakeholders meeting, Jennings Hall, 260 Powers Street, Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Info: (718) 482-4683, [kosciuszko@gw.dot.state.ny.us](mailto:kosciuszko@gw.dot.state.ny.us).

**Feb. 24, 6-8pm.** Institute for Rational Mobility's 15th Anniversary of Auto-Free New York: A Grid of Pedestrian Streets for Manhattan. NYPD Downtown Center, 104 Washington Street Conference Room. Info: (212) 475-3394; [www.auto-free.org](http://www.auto-free.org), [www.vision42.org](http://www.vision42.org).

**Feb. 25, 3:30-5:30pm and 7-9pm.** [NY Metropolitan Transportation Council](#) Regional Transportation Plan Update. Dennison Building, 100 Veterans Memorial Highway, Hauppauge. Info: (718) 472-3197 or [nymtc-rtp@dot.state.ny.us](mailto:nymtc-rtp@dot.state.ny.us).

**Feb. 26, 11am-12:30pm.** [13th Annual Symposium on Contemporary Urban Challenges](#), Fordham University School of Law. Sessions include "The Wrong Side of the Tracks: Commuting in Urban America" with Dr. Robert Bullard. Info: (212) 636-6881 or [uljsymposium@yahoo.com](mailto:uljsymposium@yahoo.com).

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

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