

# Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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## NEWS

### **NJ Transit: Fiscal Train Wreck Coming?**

The *Star-Ledger* reported recently that **more than half** of the mass transit money slated for NJ Transit's capital budget in fiscal 2005 would go to debt service and transfers of capital resources to the agency's operating budget. The situation represents a **major problem for an agency** that has added new capacity and seen robust ridership growth in recent years. If it cannot maintain and upgrade its vehicles and facilities, the railroad will be unable to offer good service, will delay expansion plans and begin to incur higher repair and replacement costs.

Governor McGreevey's **blue ribbon transportation commission** recommended that NJ Transit move away from these practices. It said the agency should be spending about \$1.8 billion per year on capital, including \$250 million for debt service. Perhaps in a concession to realism, a chart in the report maintained a transfer of \$300 million per year from the capital to the operating budget.

But NJ Transit is **far short of these levels**. In its fiscal 2004 capital program, its overall capital budget was \$1.34 billion, with \$383.5 million transferred to operating expenses and \$263 million in debt service. In its proposed FY2005 budget, spending is slated for \$1.16 billion, with over half of that amount slated for debt service and transfer to the operation budget, according to newspaper reports. Agency documents show, however, that **state-of-good-repair spending will also expand** this year.

NJ transportation commissioner Jack Lettiere said continuing these budget practices is necessary until a permanent source of capital program revenue is established. The state intends to borrow **\$900 million** to stave off any heavy capital program cuts over the next two years (see *MTR* #'s 446, 447).

But the cuts have been happening at NJ Transit for a number of years, because the operating budget has been inadequately funded. Trenton could start to ameliorate some of the problem by coming through with an increased operating appropriation this year, and set the stage for gradual increases that start to dig Transit out of its hole. But perhaps another season or two of major lapses in service, as occurred on NJT's rail system last summer, will have to take place before the political costs of **neglecting transit investment** become clearer. ❖

### **Connecticut's Winter of Discontent Sparks Wider Transportation Debate**

This past January, New Haven commuter rail line riders saw unpredictable train schedules and unprecedented increases in commute times. On February 6<sup>th</sup>, **35% of New Haven Line trains were cancelled** due to mechanical failures. Connecticut transportation officials agree that antiquated rail cars, extreme cold, and engineering mistakes were the culprits in the failures. Although the state administration seems preoccupied with its abiding political problems and has been slow to recognize the state's recent mass transit service disaster as another embarrassment for Governor Rowland.

Rowland's proposed budget for the next fiscal year originally sought to reduce a small amount slated for replacing a few trains within the New Haven Line's ageing fleet, while **hiking fares again by 5.5%**. Fortunately, a clamor of other political voices is now beginning over how to remedy the situation.

Even the loyal **transportation strategy board**, instituted by the governor several years ago, has called for action. After Oz Griebel, the strategy board's chief, urged more investment in New Haven Line rolling stock, Rowland's budget office said \$49 million to \$60 million would be made available for new cars over the next 18 months. But anyone familiar with the Rowland administration's mass transit record will be skeptical about any Connecticut plan to face up to its transit investment deficit.

**Congressman Christopher Shays** recently told the Bridgeport regional planning agency that less expensive rail cars could be purchased by converting the New Haven Line trains from a catenary to a third rail electrical system, bringing them into line with the system used by the Long Island Railroad and the NY Metro-North lines. "The (old system) trains costs between \$3.5 million and \$4 million; cars that travel on the (new system) cost about \$2 million," Shays told the *Connecticut Post*.

**Senator John McKinney** of Fairfield bravely addressed the need to raise more transportation resources. "Connecticut may be unable to find another revenue source for new railcars besides a **gas tax hike** of three to five cents," he told the *Greenwich Time*.

Whether these plans come to pass, officials and commuters are concerned that little is in place to provide relief against another potential winter wallop in 2004-05. In preparation, New Haven Line managers struck a deal last Wednesday with Amtrak to arrange **faster, more efficient repairs** of decrepit Metro North rail cars. The deal will prioritize access for New Haven Line trains at the shared Metro-North/Amtrak shop facility in New Haven, increasing **New Haven Line repair capacity by 73%**. ❖

### A Farewell to Arms II

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority is the largest collector of toll revenues in the United States – it brings in some \$ 1 billion in tolls a year, yet it **stands alone in the NY metropolitan region** with both feet in the last century when it comes to **speeding toll collections**.

Each day over 700,000 vehicles must pay their toll and come to dead stop – that's zero miles per hour – as they wait for the "arm" barrier to creak upwards to allow them to pass. It doesn't matter that two-thirds have E-ZPass, intended to speed them up. Meanwhile, the authorities that operate the **New Jersey Turnpike**, the **Garden State Parkway**, the **New York State Thruway**, and the **Hudson River** crossings have been installing or are working on plans for high-speed toll collection systems, like their counterparts around the world. The new toll installations eliminate toll booths and allow motorists to travel through the toll barrier while they maintain speed. Some interim installations that lie between old-style booths and full highway-speed tolling permit a "roll through" speed of around 20 miles per hour.

The MTA claims it must have the barrier arms to make sure that drivers don't cheat. To insure this, the agency stations personnel at toll booths at extra cost, despite the intent of E-ZPass to save money on labor. But the other toll agencies do not have this problem – they just go after cheaters with photo enforcement and collect as much or more with "service fees" from toll-beaters and absent-minded drivers. The **MTA could save money** on toll watchers and still collect its toll revenue if they installed high-speed tolls and did away with the "arms," all while introducing a **huge improvement in customer service**.

High-speed toll barriers may not work at every location and in both directions at all MTA crossings, but a good start would be at the **Verrazano-Narrows**, Bronx-Whitestone and Throgs Neck bridges, as well as the eastbound direction at the Queens-Midtown and Brooklyn-Battery tunnels. ❖

### CT Awaits Transportation Reformer

Last week we reported that ConnDOT is behind the times on transportation financing, preferring to over-allocate funds towards road projects while seriously under-investing in transit. On Wednesday, the *Stamford Advocate* reported that Connecticut transportation advocates and various elected officials agree, and are eagerly awaiting the announced retirement of ConnDOT commissioner James Byrnes on April 1<sup>st</sup>.

They told the paper that the DOT under Byrnes' leadership **has failed to invest in mass transit**. They pointed to improvements that should have been made last year, such as purchasing **new rail cars** for the ageing New Haven Line, and studying **congestion pricing** as a way to raise more money for transportation in the state.

Last year, ConnDOT Commissioner James Byrnes was appointed by Governor Rowland. Although the Transportation Strategy Board recommended several other candidates for the position, none were interviewed. Byrnes had been with ConnDOT for 35 years, and many questioned the Governor's appointment. Transportation reformers are looking to the next commissioner for a change of heart and policy direction, and hope to see a wide-ranging search re-opened.

However, Westport First Selectwoman Diane Farrell was correct when she told the *Advocate* that no matter who is appointed, good transportation decisions **ultimately rely on the governor**. "The vision has to come from the top," she told the paper. ❖

### New Plan Unveiled for Meadowlands Transit

The *Bergen Record* reported Friday that transportation planners are closing in on a plan to bring mass transit to the Meadowlands. Specific details of the plan could not be obtained last week, but the news report presented a broad overview.

A centerpiece of the plan is use of **diesel trains to extend Hudson Bergen Light Rail** service over the Northern Branch freight line, from Ridgefield to Tenafly. Because this option is cheaper than the original electric light rail plan, it would open up NJ's portion of potential federal funds for other Meadowlands transit projects. It is unclear whether the plan would require some sort of transfer along the Hudson-Bergen line between the electric and diesel-powered segments.

The rush for a Meadowlands transit link has been spurred by the Mills Corp's recreational develop-

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ment, **Xanadu**, which will include offices, hotels, and retail, as well as indoor downhill skiing, an extreme sports park and other outlandish facilities.

The plan would connect **NJ Transit's** Bergen County, Main, and Pascack Valley lines to the Meadowlands near Xanadu. It would link the Hudson-Bergen light rail to a Secaucus park and ride facility, and extend diesel light rail service from Hackensack to Hawthorne along the existing NY, Susquehanna and Western cross-county line.

**Congressman Steve Rothman** told the *Record* that the plan depends on transit funding levels in the federal "TEA-3" bill. So far, the Port Authority has contributed \$150 million for the Meadowlands connection from the Pascack Valley Line. At its site, the Mills Corp is so far paying for road improvements, but not transit infrastructure.

### **NYMTC Plan Will be More Reflective than Pro-Active**

The NY Metropolitan Transportation Council is holding public meetings around the region in preparation for the next of its long range transportation plans, covering most of downstate NY. Individuals and organizations have been contacting the Campaign with questions about this process. NYMTC must create the plan to comply with federal law.

Unfortunately, we have had to tell them that it is unlikely to shape transportation in the region very much. Our account of the last metropolitan plan, in 1999, noted it was a lackluster compilation of the Council's member-agency priorities with no clear over-arching goals. Thus, the key to what will be done is the agencies themselves. The critical forums for the region's transportation future is therefore next year's renewal of MTA and NY State DOT capital programs, along with pending decisions about future Port Authority, Thruway and NYC projects.

Nonetheless, there may be some **possibilities for progress** around the planning process. The NY State DOT, for instance, is likely to insert its "LITP 2000" program into the NYMTC document as the long-range plan for Long Island. The plan — which would widen nearly all major Long Island highways — is unpopular and viewed by many as unworkable and undesirable. Because **County Executives Levy and Suozzi** must approve the NYMTC plan for it to be adopted, it represents a chance for them to demand and win significant changes in LITP.

The Campaign's comments on the existing NYMTC plan are on-line at [www.tstc.org/reports/nymplan.html](http://www.tstc.org/reports/nymplan.html). ❖

## **Calendar**

**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).

**February 24-26, 2004.** [New Jersey Quality Initiative](#) 2004 Transportation Summit: Improving Infrastructure Through Quality. Atlantic City Convention Center. Register by 2/11. Info: (609) 530-5521.

**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).

**Feb. 26**, 3:30-5:30pm and 7-9pm. [NY Metropolitan Transportation Council](#) Regional Transportation Plan Update public meeting. Nassau County Legislative Chamber, One West Street, 5th Floor, Mineola. Info: 718-472-3197 or [nymtc-rtp@dot.state.ny.us](mailto:nymtc-rtp@dot.state.ny.us).

**Feb. 26**, 5-7pm. Long Island Railroad Commuters Council President's Forum with James Dermody, Long Island Rail Road. 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).

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

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



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MTR#448 Contributing: Tyler Burke, Jeffrey Zupan Editors: Jon Orcutt, Kate Slevin

350 West 31st Street #802, New York, NY 10001 tel. (212) 268-7474 fax (212) 268-7333 [tstc@tstc.org](mailto:tstc@tstc.org)