

# Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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## NEWS

### Smart Growth, DOT-Style

New Jersey DOT is proceeding with its Route 9 smart growth corridor project between Toms River and Tuckerton in Ocean County. A stated project goal is to end “the cycle of growth and [road] widening” that has failed to ease traffic congestion in New Jersey (or anywhere else).

The project has convened stakeholder groups of businesses, municipal officials and citizens to consider how and where future development should occur and to try to find transportation investments that can yield sustained benefits.

State DOT’s in congested areas would do well to **standardize this approach**. Consensus means a smoother path for projects through the approvals and planning pipeline, while the melding of transportation and development planning can keep road improvements from being eaten up by a general growth in traffic or by the plunking of a **big box store** next to a renovated interchange.

Other recent NJ DOT innovations include DOT scrapping the Millstone Bypass in favor of a small, far less expensive connector road and improvements to local intersections. DOT also delayed the Hillsborough Bypass in winter, 2002 after deciding that its frequent interchanges would promote sprawl. The highway – a four-mile bypass to Route 206 in Somerset County – has been redesigned to eliminate two interchanges. Earlier this year, NJDOT transformed a long-held plan to extend Route 18 along the Shore in southeastern Monmouth County into a project to build a 20-mile bikeway.

NY State DOT says it is undertaking an internal reform, but has not taken any initiatives similar to the new NJ DOT projects in years. In the 1990’s, it began participating in a small number of “sustainable development studies” organized by NY Metropolitan Transportation Council staff in the Hudson Valley and Long Island. Some of these are integrating land use into DOT project considerations. But the agency has made **no move to expand the approach** or to introduce it upstate, despite language calling for the DOT to broaden such work in New York’s version of a smart growth policy — Governor Pataki’s under-developed “quality communities” initiative. ❖

### Toll Policy: The Open Road?

#### - MTA Intransigent -

A report released last week by the Tri-State Transportation Campaign surveys the spread of **high-speed toll collection** facilities around the metropolitan region and the United States, and considers the MTA’s objections to adopting similar congestion-busting methods. Non-stop tolls have already blunted initiatives to eliminate tolls from some highways in the region, and are probably a key to more widespread use of roadway pricing in the future. The report, entitled *The Open Road: The Region’s Coming Toll Collection Revolution*, urges:

1. The MTA to immediately investigate the possibility of **abolishing barrier arms** at toll facilities on bridges that are parts of limited access highway networks, and to increase the 5 mph speed limit.
2. The MTA to create an open-road toll pilot program by 2005, to install lanes designed to match the **40-45 mph speed limits** on the Verrazano, Throgs Neck, Whitestone and Henry Hudson Bridges.
3. The MTA to test “**roll-through**” lanes at the Midtown or Brooklyn Battery Tunnel by 2006.
4. Governor Pataki to establish a Non-Stop Toll Task Force among the MTA, Port Authority, and NYS Thruway to develop a **uniform strategy** for designing and implementing open-road tolls.

A front-page *Staten Island Advance* article about the report confirmed the MTA’s long-held position that it has **no plans** to follow its sister agencies forward toward realization of the congestion relief promise of electronic toll collection. MTA Bridges and Tunnels spokesman Frank Pascual told the paper, “We remain consistent in our belief that the plaza is safer for customers and our employees with gates as traffic comes off both levels of the bridge into E-ZPass and cash lanes.”

Pascual also told the *Daily News* that the higher speeds would make some toll plazas unsafe because they have “unique configurations” — as if toll plazas elsewhere do not, for instance on Port Authority bridges — and that the gates defeat toll-beaters.

Despite the MTA assertions, our report, based largely on conversations with toll operators around the region and country, found that the **toll road industry** views non-stop toll facilities as **safer** and

more economically efficient than the traditional toll plaza design the MTA is clinging to.

High speed tolls save money by reducing shipping costs and congestion. They cut back on air pollution by reducing vehicle idling time. They also enable cash paying and EZPass paying cars to separate hundreds of yards or even miles before the toll facility, **reducing the number of toll lanes** and eliminating the dangerous merges that presently exist at toll facility.

“Every U.S. toll road operator we spoke with said open-road toll facilities were nearly accident-free,” said report author Jennifer Siegel. “The MTA’s case against non-stop tolls gets weaker as more and more agencies **successfully implement** them.” The report is available in PDF format at [www.tstc.org](http://www.tstc.org). ❖

### Non-Stop Toll in Our Region

**Port Authority Bridges** Three out of eight toll lanes on the PA’s NJ-Staten Island Outerbridge Crossing permit 25 mph speeds for E-ZPass drivers. The Port Authority estimates these lanes process 200 more cars per hour than E-ZPass lanes fitted into old-style tollbooths. The improvements are expected to further hike the E-ZPass market share at the bridge, which is now 72%, and up almost 3% from a year ago. The Port Authority hopes to install 45 mph lanes at the Outerbridge by 2005.

The Goethals Bridge also features 25 mph roll-through speed lanes, and a highway-speed facility (45 mph and up) will be installed over the next two years. The Bayonne Bridge is slated for highway-speed tolls by 2007.

The PA is progressively increasing E-ZPass lane speeds at the George Washington Bridge. Last year, roll-through speeds were raised from 5 to 15 mph, and by 2007 both the upper and lower levels are expected to have 45 mph high-speed collection lanes. Non-stop tolls will open later in 2004 at the



Express E-ZPass traffic is separated from vehicles paying cash well before the toll barrier at NJ Turnpike Exit 18W, reducing weaving and jockeying, promoting safety.

entrance unto the bridge from the Palisades Interstate Parkway.

**New Jersey Toll Roads** The NJ Turnpike Authority, which now runs both the Turnpike and the Garden State Parkway, is implementing non-stop tolling on both roads. Governor McGreevey has committed to providing high-speed lanes at nine Parkway and Turnpike toll plazas by 2005, and has made significant progress. In January, non-stop facilities opened at the Parkway’s Pascack Valley plaza at the Parkway’s northern end. Already, 93% of E-ZPass-equipped drivers use these lanes. The Toms River, Raritan South and Asbury Park interchanges are slated to open non-stop facilities in summer 2005.

The New Jersey Turnpike opened high-speed lanes at Exit 6 in 2001 and at 18W this past January. Meanwhile, dedicated non-stop lanes are slated for Exit 1 by the summer of 2004 and at Interchange 16/18E by the summer of 2005. The Turnpike Authority estimates the non-stop lanes process 800 more cars per hour than traditional E-ZPass lanes.

NJ transportation commissioner Jack Lettiere noted in an op-ed piece in Friday’s *Home News Tribune* that the NJ agencies brought their high-speed lanes on-line from scratch in just 15 months.

Meanwhile, non-stop tolls will debut on the Atlantic City Expressway this spring. An express lane – permitting speeds up to 55 mph – will run in both directions at the Pleasantville toll plaza, near Atlantic City.

**NY State Thruway** The Thruway’s Tappan Zee Bridge toll plaza features two lanes that allow cars to roll through at 20 mph. The lanes opened in December of 2003 (replacing three standard booth lanes), and the Thruway estimates they process 500 more cars per hour than traditional E-ZPass lanes. Eventually, a replaced or rebuilt Tappan Zee is expected to feature high-speed lanes.

In a five-year capital program the Thruway anticipates releasing and beginning next year, it will seek to develop open-road toll lanes at many of its barrier plazas, including those at New Rochelle, Spring Valley, and several upstate sites. ❖

### MTA Exceptionalism Considered

The MTA has used the arguments presented below to fend off the concept of high-speed tolls since at least 1998. We consider each theme in turn:

**MTA argument #1:** The MTA claims barrier gates promote safety “because they force customers to slow down and look before proceeding” into the merge beyond the toll plaza. Further, the MTA points out that employees must cross toll lanes to get to their assignments.”

**The Reality:** While barrier gates may reduce accidents at old-style toll plazas, non-stop tolls eliminate these dangerous structures altogether, along with their hazardous merges. At many plazas, ten or more toll lanes converge into three or four highway lanes. This creates dangerous bottlenecks at the precise moment drivers are accelerating to get back to speed. Non-stop tolls reduce the total number of toll lanes and merges considerably.

Tollbooths are also dangerous because they create speed differentials both before and after toll plazas. John Leonard, the Deputy Director of Georgia's CruiseCard program, explains that "accidents tend to increase significantly when you have a speed differential ... if you've got a queue and someone's not attentive [he or she will] whack the person in front." He concludes that "The best way to [improve safety] ... is to eliminate the tollbooth altogether." Since non-stop lanes opened in 1999 at the Biddle's Corner toll plaza on Route 1 in Delaware, there has not been a single crash.

Regarding workers, fewer of them are needed to run and maintain high-speed facilities, which are generally constructed with pedestrian bridges or tunnels. In contrast, the MTA forces employees to cut across toll lanes in order to assist drivers stuck behind barrier gates. Congestion at MTA facilities also appears to require the hiring and deployment of workers to direct traffic entering toll lanes.

**MTA argument #2:** The MTA says adopting non-stop tolls could mean "an unconscionable loss of more than \$12 million in toll revenues that would support mass transit and our operation."

**The Reality:** All non-stop toll plans include ways to deal effectively with violators or people who mistakenly get in the wrong lane. Typically, overhead

cameras record the license plates of non-paying vehicles, and a fine is mailed. This allows agencies to more than recoup any lost revenue. "You don't lose revenue, because you get it back through the violation fine," commented Mike Williams, a representative of the Delaware DOT.

In addition, the violation rates themselves are quite low. On Georgia's Route 400 Extension, a mere 0.2 percent of vehicles in the CruiseCard lanes – or 5,200 out of 3 million – failed to pay in January 2004. The figure includes transponder malfunctions. In our area, the NY State Thruway reports a one percent violation rate in E-ZPass lanes .

**MTA argument #3:** The MTA says non-stop tolls are "generally a feature of new roads conceived and built from scratch with non-stop tolling in mind."

**The Reality:** Other agencies in the New York area are adapting existing roads and highways to accommodate roll-through and high-speed E-ZPass to mature infrastructure. The Port Authority is adding these facilities to its bridges, while the Thruway Authority retrofitted the Tappan Zee Bridge.

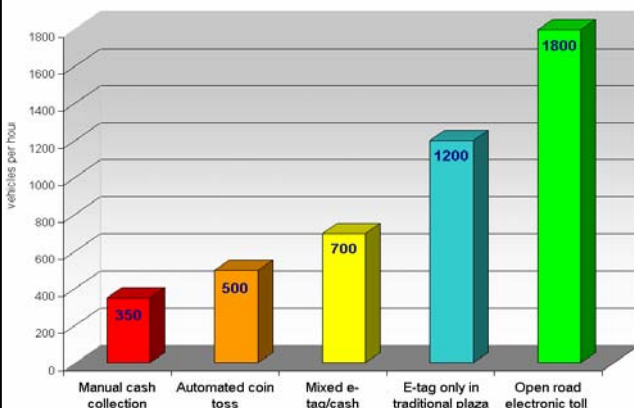
Toll authorities in other parts of the country have also generally retrofitted existing roads and bridges. The Dallas North Tollway has a roll-through policy (allowing speeds up to 30 mph) in lanes of similar width to the MTA's. Similarly, cash toll lanes on I-294, I-88, and I-90 in Illinois were retrofitted to permit roll-through tolls at up to 30 mph. In California, the Bay Area Toll Authority added dedicated Fast Track lanes (allowing speeds up to 20 mph) to all seven Bay Bridges from 2001 to 2003.

**MTA argument #4:** The MTA claims "travel conditions at our plazas have never been better" and sees no reason to make the effort to improve the status quo.

**The Reality:** While E-ZPass has improved conditions at MTA bridges and tunnels, the agency is unjustifiably complacent. These crossings still experience some of the worst congestion in the country. A recent report by the American Highway Users Alliance states, "[A] very large share of delay in the New York area is related to bridge and tunnel crossings into Manhattan, most of which are toll facilities" and asserts that if toll plazas had been included in a ranking of America's twenty-five worst bottlenecks, then "several river crossings into Manhattan would no doubt be included."

Considering New York's bridges and tunnels will experience worse traffic in the future, the MTA should look for solutions now. Open-road tolls are the easiest, most efficient way to relieve the bottlenecks represented by 20th Century toll facilities. ❖

**General Toll Plaza Lane Capacities by Method of Collection**



Source: Pietrzyk, "Electronic Toll Collection Systems," *Curb-ing Gridlock: Peak-Period Fees to Relieve Traffic Congestion*. 1994.

## Ridership in the Region

After a 4% ridership decline from 2001 to 2003, NJ Transit reported a 2.2% increase between July 2003-March 2004 and July 2002-March 2003.

	July 2003 - March 2004 (millions)	July 2003 - March 2004 (millions)	% Increase
NJTransit (rail)	49.92	51.78	3.7%
NJTransit (bus)	122.9	124.3	1.1%
Newark Subway	4.5	4.07	11%
Hudson Bergen Light Rail	3.444	3.356	2.6
River Line	0.167	N/A	N/A

State officials say the state's **recovering economy**, along with reopened PATH service and Secaucus Junction, is behind the increasing ridership.

However, according to the *Star-Ledger*, the number of passengers using **Secaucus Junction** is about 5,600 per day. NJ Transit projections from September hoped for about 7,500 by this time. But NJ Transit Executive Director George Warrington told the paper that station use was increasing by 300-400 a month, and should reach 8,500 riders by the end of the year.

Further east, **MTA overall ridership**, along with that on each of its subsidiaries, continued to drop during the winter. The system's ridership also declined from 2002-2003.

	Jan- March 2003 (mill.)	Jan- March 2004 (mill.)	% decrease
NYC Transit	184.7	181.6	1.6%
LIRR	19.4	19.2	1.0%
Metro-North	17.13	16.81	1.8%
LI Bus	7.14	7.09	.7%
<b>TOTAL (approx)</b>	<b>228.37</b>	<b>224.7</b>	<b>1.6%</b>

Meanwhile, the **JFK AirTrain**, which opened in December, is steadily attracting riders. In May 2004, ridership reached 26,500. 23,000 were free trips within the airport and 6,778 were revenue rides from Howard Beach or Jamaica. Projected monthly passenger total after 12 months is 34,000. ❖

The Tri-State Transportation Campaign web site:

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

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## Calendar

**June 14**, 4:00pm-8:00pm, New York City Economic Development Corporation: Cross Harbor Freight Movement Project - Public Hearing @ Bayonne City Hall, 630 Avenue C, Bayonne, NJ 877-942-7347 [www.crossharborstudy.com](http://www.crossharborstudy.com)

**June 15**, 5:30pm. Access to the Region's Core citizens committee. Update on DEIS for new NJ-Manhattan commuter rail tunnel. NJ Transit HQ, 1 Penn Plaza East, Newark. 973-491-8912.

**June 16**, 4:00pm-8:00pm, New York City Economic Development Corporation: Cross Harbor Freight Movement Project - Public Hearing @ Casita Maria, 928 Simpson Street, Bronx Info: 1-877-942-7347 [www.crossharborstudy.com](http://www.crossharborstudy.com)

**June 18**, 12:30pm Housatonic Valley Council of Elected Officials: 2005-2009 Connecticut STIP Public Meeting, @ Brookfield Town Hall, Silvermine Road, Brookfield CT Info: (860)-594-2045 [www.ct.gov/dot/](http://www.ct.gov/dot/)

**June 22**, 4:00-8:00pm World Trade Center Transportation Hub PATH Terminal and Pedestrian Connections, DEIS Public Hearing. @ Council Chambers, City Hall, 280 Grove Street, Jersey City, NJ. Info: 212-435-5599 [www.panynj.gov/pathrestoration](http://www.panynj.gov/pathrestoration)

**June 23**, 4:00-8:00pm World Trade Center Transportation Hub PATH Terminal and Pedestrian Connections, DEIS Public Hearing. @ St. John's University Manhattan Campus 101 Murray Street, New York, NY Info: 212-435-5599 [www.panynj.gov/pathrestoration](http://www.panynj.gov/pathrestoration)

**June 24**, 4-8pm. Public hearing on draft environmental impact statement for West Street tunnel in vicinity of the World Trade Center site. NY State DOT. U.S. Custom House, 1 Bowling Green, Manhattan. [www.route9a.com](http://www.route9a.com)

**June 29**, 4:00pm-8:00pm, New York City Economic Development Corporation: Cross Harbor Freight Movement Project - Public Hearing @ PS 11 Cafeteria 886 Bergen Avenue Jersey City NJ, 877-942-7347 [www.crossharborstudy.com](http://www.crossharborstudy.com)

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

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