

# Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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## NEWS

### Traffic Rebounding?

Transportation indicators appear to point toward economic recovery and big headaches ahead for the region's drivers and highway managers. Though overall traffic and congestion has hit a plateau since 2000, it is likely a strong economic upturn could **return the record-setting traffic levels** seen in 1999 and 2000 to the metropolitan region. That period was marked by front-page tabloid stories calling for city and state transportation chiefs to get busy unfreezing chronic traffic jams. Are our DOTs prepared for a return to those days, or for traffic that exceeds the gridlocked days of 99-00?

After several years of declining or stagnant automobile travel, monthly vehicle miles of travel figures from the Federal Highway Administration show a nationwide **growth in driving of 3 percent** from New Years through April 2004 over the same period in 2003. In the Northeast, growth in driving has been slower, with VMT up only 1.6% over last year. But this still represents a marked change over the 2.2% decline seen through April 2003 over the same period in 2002. Higher gasoline prices that took hold after April may dampen the trend somewhat. Nevertheless, if a robust recovery is underway, VMT may reach unseen heights and demand innovative responses from road managers.

Despite higher fuel prices, trucking and freight logistics firms report heavy demand, tight capacity and strong second quarter economic performance. Some trucking companies are so busy they are reporting driver shortages. Major east coast railroads also reported a continuing surge of freight volume in quarterly reports to shareholders. According to the *Wall St. Journal* in July, CSX Corp. and Norfolk Southern reported second quarter growth in almost every freight category. Strong demand for rail services has created significant delays on the CSX network, according to the *WSJ*, and other sources note similarly worsening bottlenecks at some west coast railroads. As we noted last week, 21<sup>st</sup> Century state DOT's will have to cope not only with general traffic congestion, but also with a **tidal wave of freight movement**. Given the developing situation, these agencies should be organizing innovative travel demand management task forces and larger rail freight investment budgets now. ❖

### MTA Financing: Look to Albany

NYC editorial boards rightly pinned the problems of transit financing in New York on Albany in the aftermath of the release of the MTA's draft 2005 budget and 2005-2009 capital program. The 2005 budget spelled out an ominous menu of fare increases and service cuts and warned that things could get even worse in 2006. The capital program laid out the projects needed to improve the existing system and build major new capacity projects, but fulfilling it will require about \$3 billion per year in new resources (see *MTR* 468).

*Newsday* called the 2005 budget "disastrous," spotlighting the fact that fare increases plus service cuts mean **riders will pay more for less**. The paper said the MTA is painting a doomsday scenario because it cannot raise its own funding in the state capitol: "the MTA needs a champion in Albany who can find new ways to pay for the system. Asking riders to absorb the cost once again will do more harm than good."

The *Daily News* noted the cumulative fare increases riders would be hit by over 2003-2005 if the MTA's "gap closing actions" take effect. It said that the "MTA is in the mess because it has been **pauperized by Albany**...As a result, the MTA faces deficits running to billions of dollars for years to come...

"New Yorkers...are no doubt willing to pay their share for quality service, but there is only so much they can, or should, bear. The transit system is an engine of the regional and state economies, and so its expenses must be borne far more broadly. Yes, the MTA does get tax revenue support, but the balance between riders and taxpayers is going out of whack....

"**Pataki, Silver, Bruno and Mayor Bloomberg**...have to face up to the fact that the MTA needs more direct government aid. The question is whether Albany will provide it or let the system - and the economy - go down the tubes."

The editorial boards will need to stay on the case over the next year. Winning action for new state and city fiscal support of mass transit will not be easy — the governor changes the subject whenever asked about it, the Senate has already criticized the scale of the proposed capital program and the Assembly is

in the habit of attacking the MTA whenever things look bad, without ever offering proposals of its own to pay for expanded service or new capacity. ❖

### Port Authority, Thruway Move to Speed Tolls

The region saw still more high-speed tolling developments (as well as low-speed announcements by the MTA) this past week:

- The **Port Authority** Board of commissioners approved a plan to implement high-speed toll lanes at the NJ-Staten Island Outerbridge Crossing. Though we have previously cited 2007 as the project's completion date, the Port Authority said this week the high-speed Outerbridge lanes will be up and running by next summer.

The project will create two lanes that permit drivers to pay tolls while proceeding at 45 miles per hour, the Outerbridge's posted speed limit. The PA plans to have **high-speed lanes at all of its toll bridges**.

Port Authority Vice Chairman and Pataki administration insider Charles Gargano lauded the project as good for commuters and shippers. However, the Pataki administration is still allowing the old blood at **MTA Bridges and Tunnels** to prevent the MTA from joining the rest of the toll road industry in embracing the potential of electronic toll collection.

- Instead the MTA announced it would try to fight congestion at its toll plazas by continuing to rear-range E-ZPass lanes and increasing fines for drivers who try to back out of toll booths or who fail to correctly attach E-ZPass tags to their vehicles.

The Bridges and Tunnels budget in the MTA 2005-2009 capital program proposal totals \$1.25 billion. **\$92.3 million**, or 7% is slated for toll plaza or other traffic management (such as ITS and surveillance equipment installation) projects. We erroneously stated last week that the Verrazano toll plaza would come in for major investment – the Whitestone and Henry Hudson bridges' plazas are the two explicitly identified for renovation or planning work in the capital program proposal.

The Port Authority said its Outerbridge high speed toll lanes project will cost **\$9.9M**, more or less in line with some of the high speed toll projects implemented on New Jersey's toll highways.

- The Albany *Times-Union* last week detailed some of the NY State Thruway Authority's emerging plans for what it calls "highway-speed" tolls. The

article confirmed that the 5-year capital program the Thruway is developing projects to eliminate stop-and-go toll payment with E-ZPass applications to allow paying drivers to proceed at the normal highway speed limit. Some projects would install highway speed E-ZPass lanes at main-line toll barriers like New Rochelle, as the NJ Turnpike and Garden State Parkway have done. Others might scrap on-ramp toll plazas in favor of new main-line high speed installations. ❖

### MTA Fare Plan Would Curb Express Buses

Staten Islanders reacted strongly to the highest percentage fare increase identified last week among likely "gap closing" actions the MTA will take to balance its 2005 budget. The 50% hike in the NYC Transit express bus fare, from \$4 to \$6 one-way, coming after last year's \$1 (33%) hike would mean a **doubling of express bus fares in two years**.

Express buses have been a fast-growing segment of NYC transit ridership since the mid-1990s. A reduction in the fare from \$4 to \$3 in 1998 helped fuel the trend, as did rapid population growth on Staten Island, which contributes about three-quarters of NYC express bus riders.

The doubling of the fare is likely to end this growth, if not to absolutely **curtail express bus use in the city**. The MTA has long complained that express bus services are its most heavily subsidized, and says the huge fare increase will allow it to generate \$19 million toward the \$436 million budget gap the agency would face if it took no remedial actions. MTA executive director Katherine Lapp was cited in the *Advance* stating that without the big fare increase, the agency would "largely eliminate" express bus service.

One of the major drawbacks to NYC of having transportation policy in a multitude of hands is that the consequences of certain policy actions are often left to others to address. The MTA management is hostile to express bus service from a bean-counter perspective that weighs all service to all riders according to one scale. However, the context of express bus riding in New York City is that many of those likely to abandon express buses are car owners from a fast growing, traffic-choked borough with no access to rapid rail service. Is repelling would-be transit riders in this situation in the best interests of the city and the region? ❖

### NJ Clears Traffic Calming Roadblocks

Legislation that makes it easier for municipalities to build speed humps on dangerous streets without a lengthy approval process from the state Department of Transportation (DOT) was signed into law by Governor McGreevey in July. The legislation also

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requires the DOT to design statewide standards for speed hump construction.

The bill (A. 2161) was introduced by Assemblyman Robert Diegnan and merged with similar legislation written by Assemblywoman Linda Stender before it left the Assembly Transportation Committee. A. 2161 was then passed by the Assembly and Senate, with near unanimous support, before the summer recess and signed by the governor last month.

This legislation's passage comes on the heels of a report in the *American Journal of Public Health* (MTR 456, Traffic Calming Works) showing that **Speed hump installations** are associated with a **53%-60% reduction** in a child's chances of being hurt or killed by a vehicle.

Being hit by a vehicle is the **leading cause of death** among U.S. children ages 5 to 14. For the past 20 years, boys and lower income children are the most likely to be involved in such accidents. It is now up to municipalities to identify the most dangerous streets in their borders and install the appropriate traffic calming devices to insure their children's safety. ❖

### Bike Lanes That Work

According to Transportation Alternatives, the NYC DOT has released its first-ever comprehensive **before-and-after analysis of bicycle lane efficacy**.

The "Oriental Boulevard Bike Lane Impacts" study showed that new high-quality bike lanes in Manhattan Beach, Brooklyn — which are five feet wide with a four- to five-foot buffer zone between the bike lane and traffic lanes — reduced speeding, boosted bicycle use and produced an overall reduction in motor traffic on the boulevard and adjacent streets.

The number of crashes on the boulevard did not increase or diminish in the year after the bike lanes were installed.

City transportation commissioner Iris Weinsall said in a release that the study found no evidence of **motor traffic diversion** to Shore Boulevard.

The lanes were created in April, 2003 after the community had complained about drag racing, speeding and cruising on Oriental Boulevard, according to T.A. NYC DOT removed one eastbound and one westbound motor travel lane and striped in the buffered bike lanes. However, complaints about the bike lanes then ensued, prompting the after-study. See: [transalt.org](http://transalt.org) and [www.nyc.gov/html/dot/pdf/orientalblvd.pdf](http://www.nyc.gov/html/dot/pdf/orientalblvd.pdf) ❖

### Calendar

**August 12**, 12:15pm. Long Island Rail Road Commuters Council, monthly meeting. 347 Madison Avenue, 10th floor, Manhattan. 212-878-7087.

**August 19**, Noon. Metro-North Railroad Commuter Council [monthly meeting](#). 347 Madison Avenue, 10th floor. Manhattan. 212-878-7087.

**August 19**, 5:30pm. NJ Transit "Access to the Region's Core" meeting on draft environmental impact study for new commuter rail tunnel between New Jersey and Manhattan. 1 Penn Plaza, 2nd floor (Parsons Brinckerhoff), Manhattan. [www.accesstotheregionscore.com](http://www.accesstotheregionscore.com), 973-491-8912.

**August 24**, 6pm. Walking tour -- "Towards and Auto-Free Lower Manhattan." Auto Free NY. Meet at NYPD downtown Center, 104 Washington St. (north of Rector), Manhattan. [www.auto-free.org](http://www.auto-free.org), 212-475-3394.

**September 28**, 6-8pm. Auto-Free NY lecture: "Promoting safe walking and cycling to improve public health." Prof. John Pucher, Rutgers Univ. Conference room, NYPD downtown center, 104 Washington St., Manhattan. [www.auto-free.org](http://www.auto-free.org), 212-475-3394.

**September 30**. Deadline for comments on cross-harbor freight rail tunnel environmental impact study. [www.crossharborstudy.com](http://www.crossharborstudy.com). 877-942-7347.

**October 19**, 6:30pm. Public meeting to start Kosciuszko Bridge replacement project environmental impact study. NY State DOT. Martin Luther HS. 60-02 Maspeth Ave., Queens. 212-532-4175.

**October 27**, 6:30pm. Public meeting to start Kosciuszko Bridge replacement project environmental impact study. NY State DOT. St. Cecilia's Church, 84 Herbert St., Brooklyn. 212-532-4175.

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

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



Mobilizing the Region

MTR#469 Contributing: Michelle Ernst, Damien Newton 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)