

Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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NEWS

Six Decades of Route 92 Debt

In an exclusive report in August, WNBC News said the debt brought on by the construction of Route 92 in Middlesex County would take the NJ Turnpike **almost 60 years to pay off**. The estimate does not include any major repairs or re-paving of the road that will be necessary during that time.

The station based its figures on expected toll rates the Turnpike released in 1995 and the road usage projected in the 2004 project DEIS. Toll revenue was not estimated in the 2004 DEIS.

No Turnpike Authority employees were available to comment on the report — it was noted that Route 92 supporters were “all out of town.” For the Turnpike Authority to refute these numbers, it would have to detail what the expected toll charges for trucks, buses and cars will be.

With state transportation finance facing a precarious future, NJ should decline to proceed with such a costly and unnecessary highway project. One partial fix for the looming transportation deficit would be to use capital funding already earmarked for Route 92 on basic infrastructure upkeep instead. ❖

Transportation an Issue for Farrell

Dianne Farrell, First Selectwoman of Westport, is in a close match for Congress against Republican incumbent Christopher Shays (Rep) in Connecticut's western district. Farrell says Shays has not sufficiently won federal transit funds in his 17 years in Congress, and has even **put up billboards on I-95** blaming Shays for the route's chronic gridlock. As a municipal leader, Farrell has been outspoken about the need for mass transit investment and the futility of various highway expansion plans.

Shays says the feds have given CT \$2 billion over the past 5 years. Shays noted that ConnDOT decides how federal money is spent and told newspapers Farrell “should run for state office” if she wants to improve transportation in the district. Shays supports projects to increase rail freight activity in Connecticut and recently offered what he said was a least-cost plan for replacing New Haven line rail cars (*MTR #449*).

Farrell is looking to the federal government to provide the funds needed to replace the New Haven Line's obsolete train fleet. ❖

The Shrinking Gas Tax

All three states that make up the metropolitan region are **desperate for money to invest in transportation**. New Jersey revenues that support mass transit and highway improvements are close to being 100% dedicated to debt service. The state's capital programs function today only because NJ has discovered a new form of borrowing (GARVEE bonds, which are backed by future federal transportation aid). New York transit riders are facing the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's ballooning debt, which is likely to trigger another round of fare increases in 2005, while there is no clear picture at all of how the state will reauthorize its highway programs next year. Connecticut has not indulged in borrow-and-spend transportation budgeting as egregiously as has its neighbors, but consequently it has starved key systems, like the New Haven commuter rail line, of badly needed investment.

While it may be obvious that the blame for this situation can be attributed to the tax allergy firmly rooted in American politics, exploring some of the details of transportation budgets and revenues may ultimately help elected officials facing a fiscal cliff make the case for the new revenues needed to maintain or increase investment in our critical transportation systems.

All three states impose an excise tax on gasoline, which makes up a sizeable portion of state revenues collected for transportation-related purposes. In New York, Albany added a partially-indexed petroleum business tax to the state motor fuels tax in the early 1990s, the last major revenue source implemented to finance transportation. Connecticut approved a gradually increasing gas tax after the collapse of the I-95 Mianus River Bridge in 1983, which at 38cents/gallon in 1996 was the highest state gas tax in the U.S. However, a series of cuts has brought the CT tax to 25 cents in 2001, where it has remained since. New Jersey's 10.5-cent per gallon gas tax is the 3rd lowest in the U.S. and it has not been increased since 1988.

Political trends aside, one reason gas taxes have not been raised much in recent decades is that **erosion of tax rates' purchasing power** at the hand of regular, economy-wide price inflation has been masked by steadily increasing car ownership, vehi-

cle miles of travel and weak or negative gains in overall vehicle fuel efficiency. In other words, for many years, gas tax receipts increased in spite of a declining real tax rate. In the 1990s, big increases in federal transportation aid may also have contributed to the illusion that transportation revenues were keeping pace with needs. But according to a 2003 Brookings Institution report, only three states have increased gas tax rates sufficiently to keep pace with inflation. In that period, **Connecticut and New York reduced gas tax rates** (NY marginally, due to indexing of part of the petroleum business tax to inflation), while New Jersey's has remained low.

At the same time, the vehicle-miles traveled trend that has allowed gas tax receipts to rise without a rate increase has put huge wear and tear and congestion stresses (compounded by the additional trend of quickly rising truck-miles traveled) on the transportation system. In our region, economic expansion, new NYC fare policies and system expansion projects in New Jersey also caused a mass transit ridership boom in the 1990s. There is simply not enough money with present revenues to fund the needs of our systems.

Prior to the Rowland administration, Connecticut had coped with the problem with its gradually escalating gas tax. However, the policy did not survive the tax cutting politics of the 1990s and upward pressure on gas prices. Its fate raises the question of whether gas tax hikes are a strong option today with prices at \$2 per gallon. It's possible that a new tax or fees could be linked to a specific, popular project, such as the Second Avenue subway, much the way that Gov. Pataki has proposed a new hotel tax to pay for Javits Center expansion and costs associated with west side stadium construction. However, the mundane costs of keeping the rest of our mass transit and road systems also demand more revenue. ❖

Gas Tax Erosion in the Metro Region

	1992 rate — cents per gallon	1992 rate in 2002 dollars	2002 rate	Percent change in inflation-adjusted rate	State rank in real gas tax reduction
CT	26	33.23	25	-24.76%	2nd
NJ	10.5	13.42	10.5	-21.75%	4th (tied w/ 19 states)
NY State	22.89	29.25	22	-24.79%	1st

Brookings Institution. NY figures add motor fuels and petroleum business taxes.

MTA Sitting on Plan to Fix Verrazano Toll

The *Staten Island Advance* recently received a draft of a consultant study for the MTA that outlines a major overhaul for the Verrazano Narrows Bridge toll plaza. The newspaper's publication of the study's recommendations may be significant because the MTA's draft capital program does not include any work on the plaza, not even an environmental impact statement that could ensure that the overhaul is ready to go in the MTA capital program beginning in 2010.

The plan outlined in the study would reconfigure ramps on and off of the bridge and Staten Island Expressway to reduce weaving traffic near the toll plaza. It would eliminate the remnant toll plaza on the Brooklyn-bound side of the bridge, where tolls have not been collected since 1986, and move the Staten Island-bound toll plaza closer to the bridge itself. The study says the **existing toll plaza is increasingly decrepit and tough to maintain**. New on- and off-ramps between the Expressway and Hylan Boulevard would likely ease overall traffic and speed express bus trips. Reduction in overall traffic weaving at the toll plaza would be conducive to the implementation of non-stop tolls, which the MTA so far will offer any excuse to avoid.



A Staten Island candidate for State Assembly has called on the MTA to **implement non-stop tolls** at the Verrazano Bridge. Republican hopeful Mario Bruno says it's unacceptable that the MTA is foot-dragging while other toll agencies seek to take advantage of E-ZPass' true potential. "The problem now facing us is that the MTA refuses to move forward and keep up with the times" Bruno told the *Staten Island Advance*. Bruno is running against Assemblyman Robert Stranieri and is a retired engineer who worked for NYC DOT, according to the *Advance*. He wants the MTA to abolish its toll gates immediately and provide resources in its new capital program to move to a **non-stop toll system by 2006**. The recommendations are close to those made by the Tri-State Campaign in its May 2004 "Open Road" report on the progress of high-speed tolls around the region (www.tstc.org/reports/TheOpenRoad.pdf). ❖

Connecticut Looks to Jersey

The Transportation Strategy Board is moving ahead with the New Haven-Hartford-Springfield commuter rail study, which would launch frequent train service in CT's major north-south corridor. The board will seek public input on the project this fall. It still has many hurdles to cross before construction: ConnDOT aims to have federal New Starts money and \$250 million in state funds for the work. Elected officials have strongly supported the pro-

ject, touting it as a job engine. In a recent *Hartford Courant* op-ed, mayors John DeStefano of New Haven and Mark Begnini of Meriden argued that **lack of mobility in Connecticut has slowed job growth**: "The areas around the planned New Haven-Hartford line are home to most of CT's residents, and we face the challenge of protecting them and their jobs from the threat of a failing system. Fortunately, the new rail line proposal offers us a chance to clear our highways, build the foundation for our future and breathe new life into our region." Elected officials told the *Connecticut Post* that New Jersey added 46,000 jobs since 2001, while CT lost 41,000. They noted that "efficient transportation attracts business and spurs growth" and blamed stagnant, aging transport systems for CT's woes. NJ has steadily added capacity to its mass transit system since the early 1990s with projects like the Kearny and Montclair connections, Secaucus Junction and Hudson-Bergen light rail system. CT is having trouble launching a modest bus rapid transit project and frequently proposes cuts to its bus system and branch commuter rail lines.

ConnDOT will begin collecting public comments in Sept. on a recommendation to widen I-95 in the eastern half of the state, from Branford to the Rhode Island border. See <http://i95southeastct.org>. ❖

Brooklyn Rumble

OUTRAGE, a Williamsburg-based civic group in Brooklyn, staged another truck action event last week to call attention to trucks driving illegally on residential city streets. Dozens of members, Assemblymember Vito Lopez, and State Senator Martin Malave Dilan supported their law enforcement team- the 60th and 64th precinct NYPD Truck Enforcement officials and NYS Department of Environmental Conservation agents-as they pulled over roughly 40 trucks and issued 91 summonses. In total, **\$72,000 worth of summonses** were issued.

Besides driving off designated routes, trucks had overweight loads or failed emissions tests. In response to a trucker's accusation of harassment, local activists noted that the community is resigned to trucks in the neighborhood, but demands they obey local and state laws. With more events planned for the future, residents hope that such crackdowns will ultimately be unnecessary. www.wgoutrage.org. ❖

The Tri-State Transportation Campaign web site:

www.tstc.org

Calendar

September 15, 8am. [Forum](#): "Lessons learned from land use/transportation studies in the metropolitan region." NYU Rudin Center for Transportation Policy. With Bob Dennison, NYSDOT, Thom Kleiner, Orangetown supervisor, Valerie Scopaz, Town of Southold and others. 60 Washington Sq. South, #914, Manhattan. Rsvp to or bella.pierson@nyu.edu 212-998-7545.

September 15, 1pm. NJ Transit board of directors meeting. One Penn Plaza East, Newark. 973-491-7077. www.njtransit.com

September 20, 10 am. NYC DOT public hearing: rule change for permanent access to Grand Central Parkway for single-unit trucks between the Triboro Bridge and the BQE. 40 Worth Street, Room 999, Manhattan. 212-442-7033.

September 23, 10am. NYC City Council hearing on legislation (Intro 98-a) to prohibit sale and operation of motorized scooters. 250 Broadway, 14th floor, Manhattan. www.nyccouncil.info, 212-788-7210.

September 28, 6pm. "Promoting Safe Walking and Cycling to Improve Public Health." Auto-Free NY lecture by Rutgers professor John Pucher. Conference Room, NYPD Downtown Center, 104 Washington Street. Manhattan. 212-475-3394. www.auto-free.org

October 15, 8:30 a.m. Association of New Jersey Environmental Commissions annual environmental congress: "Beyond Home Rule - Protecting the Environment Through Regional Planning." Mercer County Community College, 1200 Old Trenton Road, West Windsor. 973-539-7547. www.anjec.org

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 25, 6:30pm. Museum of the City of NY civic series: "Transportation." With Elliot Sander, Sam Schwarz and Diana Fortuna. 1220 5th Ave., Manhattan (at 103rd Street). rsvp 212-564-4441.

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

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



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