

Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

Number 475

October 4, 2004

NEWS

Bloomberg Taking a Pass on Transit Construction Plan?

When the MTA board of directors approved the agency's huge 2005-2009 capital program last week, Mayor Bloomberg's four board representatives abstained from the vote. While the exact message the mayor was sending was murky, Bloomberg appointee Mark Page said that without tangible funding sources, the proposed capital program was "quite empty."

The obvious problem with Page's statement is that the MTA does not form and finance its construction program in isolation — it needs funding help and **political support** from city and state governments.

That is an argument MTA leadership is now rightly making more often and more pointedly, but Bloomberg's action suggests city government is already seeking to walk away from the process. The Straphangers Campaign's Gene Russianoff criticized the abstention, saying "We need Mayor Bloomberg to lead, not to abstain."

The MTA program calls for over \$27 billion in mass transit construction, including about \$17 billion to continue repair and normal replacement for the existing transit system, with the rest for major expansion projects. The program's elements, from new subway cars and unseen tunnel infrastructure to Long Island Railroad expansion and the Second Avenue subway, are all needed to provide a foundation for the region's mobility and economic health well into the 21st Century.

The mayor may take a **significant risk** if he departs early from any negotiation over the transit program. If the city administration will not help fund the program, it will be called out in public during a city election year to identify which of its parts should be removed. The mayor's political opponents will try to label him a billionaire **out of touch** with the priorities of the majority of NYC voters. If Bloomberg becomes the mayor who helps take the 2nd Avenue Subway off the table and scales back new subway car purchases, all while remaining fixated on building a football stadium on transit property as his number one construction priority, he may prove them right. ❖

Downstate Roads: Long Route to Good Repair

Think New York City's roads are in bad shape? You're right. A new Tri-State Transportation Campaign analysis of federal pavement condition data (from 2002) reveals that **97.8 percent** of the NY State DOT-run Interstates, freeways, expressways, other principal arterials in the city are "in less than good condition." Long Island is just behind, with 85.9 percent of major state-owned roadways in similarly dubious shape. Lower Hudson Valley (DOT "Region 8") roads were third worst in the state, with 61.8 percent in less than good condition.

Roads in "less than good" condition are rated by road agencies as either "poor," "mediocre" or "fair," and are determined to be in need of "immediate" or "near future" repair. While only about 7 to 8 percent of Long Island and Hudson Valley roads are in bad enough shape to warrant the "poor" rating, nearly half (45.9%) of New York City's roads achieve this dismal classification. These roads "need immediate repair to restore serviceability," according to the Federal Highway Administration field manual.

Overall, the majority (54 percent) of New York State DOT's major roadways are in good or very

2002 Conditions on NY State Owned Roads, by NY State DOT Region

NYS DOT Region	Percentage of Lane Miles in Less than Good Condition		
	Major Rural Roadways	Major Urban Roadways	All Major Roadways
Region 1	40.5%	58.1%	46.5%
Region 2	32.3%	36.9%	33.3%
Region 3	9.3%	31.5%	16.3%
Region 4	27.0%	53.9%	33.6%
Region 5	43.5%	63.3%	53.8%
Region 6	24.7%	25.8%	24.9%
Region 7	10.9%	39.0%	13.6%
Region 8 (Hudson Valley)	49.9%	72.3%	61.8%
Region 9	44.3%	54.0%	45.9%
Region 10 (L.I.)	88.7%	85.7%	85.9%
Region 11 (NYC)	N/A	97.8%	97.8%
Total NY State	32.1%	67.3%	46.0%

Source: TSTC analysis of FHWA Highway Performance Monitoring System, 2002.

good condition (DOT Region 7 north of the Adirondacks rates best). However, NYSDOT-owned urban Interstates, freeways, expressways and other principal arterials bear the brunt of the potholes and deteriorated structural elements, with about **67 percent** needing repair now or in the near future.

While NYSDOT has made significant progress in improving road conditions statewide, with the percentage of roadways in less than good condition dropping by more than 26 percent over the last ten years, there is clearly room for improvement and greater investment in cities, and throughout the downstate area.

As noted in *MTR #474*, New York State will soon have to approve a new 5-year highway spending program. Mounting debt service payments could severely constrain the state's ability to maintain its crumbling roads and bridges, though the discussion about how to finance state DOT programs has apparently not yet begun. ❖

Toll Policy Change Would Help MTA Raise Money

Community Consulting Services this week called for elimination of the 50-cent discount for E-ZPass users at the MTA's bridges and tunnels, arguing that the change would raise far more revenue for the agency than the \$1 monthly E-ZPass user fee proposed in the 2005 MTA budget. The organization said eliminating the discount would raise \$105 million annually versus \$7 million from the new fee, and that the discount is an unneeded remnant of E-ZPass' introduction some ten years ago.

Currently, MTA tolls are \$3.50 for drivers with E-ZPass, \$4 without. The agency has proposed raising tolls 50 cents, implementing the \$1 monthly fee, cutting transit service and increasing subway, bus, and commuter rail fares in order to pay for a \$436 million 2005 budget gap.

Before the fare and toll increases in 2003, Komanoff Energy Associates and the Tri-State Campaign released a report showing the MTA could offer drivers **congestion-busting off-peak toll discounts** without sacrificing revenue from the toll increase. The MTA ignored the report, implementing the usual flat increase that gave drivers nothing but higher prices.

The Komanoff report looked closely at hiking rush-hour tolls to \$5, while keeping off-peak rates at \$3.50. It estimated that this schedule would raise the same amount as the MTA's flat \$4 price — about \$100 million in additional toll revenue per year. However, it found that the variable tolls would reduce rush-hour round trips by 1-2 minutes, which, aggregated over the millions of annual peak trips, could be worth as much as \$36 million annually. ❖

Jump Start for Nassau Hub ?

A *Newsday* opinion piece last Thursday by Neil Lewis, director of the Long Island Neighborhood Network and member of Nassau County's planning commission noted that the traffic consequences of the 60-story condo-hotel building proposed near the Nassau Coliseum by Charles Wang are "likely to be the number one issue" on the minds of nearby citizens and municipal leaders. However, Lewis argued that the beginning of denser development in central Nassau County could be the key that triggers the construction of a **more intensive mass transit system** there. Nassau County government is in the midst of a study seeking feasible transit concepts to underpin denser development in the "Nassau Hub" area. ❖

Highway Removal: A Road to Revitalization ?

At a September 21 symposium in the Bronx, transportation officials, Hunts Point business figures, community activists and elected officials heard the stories of key figures in the removal of highways in Milwaukee and San Francisco (see *MTR #474*).

The event was organized by advocates of removing the Sheridan Expressway, which runs between the Cross-Bronx and Bruckner Expressways. NY State DOT has proposed spending hundreds of millions of dollars to modernize the Bruckner-Sheridan interchange and upgrade truck access to Hunts Point industries. Transportation reformers and community organizations say truck access can be improved at the same time that the little-used Sheridan gives way to better city land uses, such as housing, commercial development and park-land.

That case was made strongly by **Ajamu Kitwana** of Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice and the Pratt Institute's **Joan Byron** in an excellent visual presentation of the area's environmental burdens and how a multi-element Sheridan demapping program would ease some of them. The plan would build a new interchange from the Bruckner to the Leggett Avenue gateway into Hunts Point, while removing the Sheridan and easing traffic flow along the Bruckner and Cross-Bronx.

Bronx elected officials took in the Milwaukee and San Francisco cases with interest. **Borough President Adolfo Carrion**, who helped the Sheridan decommissioning plan along as a member of the city council, remained open to the idea and said that he hoped that removing the Sheridan could work. However, he also mentioned the "compromise" of closing the highway on weekends so that recreational users could use it. That is a small interim step that might be welcome if put into practice immediately, but is a very far cry from the revitalization that could take place along the lower Bronx River if

the land the Sheridan occupies is retaken for other uses — it would fail to seize the opportunity to reorganize the south Bronx' infrastructure that the aging of the Bruckner-Sheridan interchange represents.

State Assemblyman Ruben Diaz Jr. said he eagerly awaited results of the current State DOT study of the issue, which has included the possibility of removing the Sheridan. Diaz too said he remained open to all possibilities. He heavily emphasized the South Bronx' asthma problem and took heart from San Francisco's ability to forge consensus for the Embarcadero Freeway tear-down. He challenged all parties to forge a **win-win plan for the area**.

Unfortunately, that challenge was discarded almost immediately by Myra Gordon of the NYC Terminal Produce Cooperative Market, who issued a harshly intransigent statement against Sheridan demapping. She ignored the community plan's emphasis on the Leggett interchange or the fact that most trucks reaching the market now use Bruckner Boulevard rather than the Sheridan. For an event that emphasized collaborative solution-building, her remarks were especially striking, and constituted for many veterans of transportation project debates and battles among the most polarizing public statements they had ever witnessed. She was chastised especially by San Francisco consensus-builder Boris Dramov. Fortunately, Gordon is a staff representative of the market association only, and many of the actual business owners there are likely to take their own positions on the issue and be more receptive to the facts regarding transportation and to the desirability of decent community relations.

A NY State DOT official said results from the Bruckner-Sheridan interchange EIS may begin to be released this winter. ❖

Life's a Glitch on the New Haven Line

New Haven line Metro-North riders are generally less happy with service than their Harlem and Hudson line counterparts, according to a recently released rider satisfaction survey. That is hardly surprising, given last year's "winter of woe" when up to a third of New Haven Line cars were out of service on cold or snowy days. 87% of riders expressed satisfaction with New Haven Line service, down from 90% in the previous survey, and compared to 95% and 93% on the NY Harlem Valley and Hudson lines.

It's possible New Haven Line frustrations will continue to worsen. Another 180 new cars will enter service this year on the Harlem and Hudson lines. CT's best is to buy 33 used cars from Virginia for Shore Line East, and to move Shore Line East cars to New Haven Line service. ConnDOT still has no plans to have new M7 rail cars in service before 2010. ❖

NJ Insurance Plan to Stiff Urban Drivers

New Jersey has had the highest auto-insurance rates in the country 14 out of the last 16 years, so finding ways to lower rates are a **top priority** for lawmakers. However, New Jersey's new proposal may end up punishing urban drivers, noted a recent *Jersey Journal* editorial.

In New Jersey, and most of the United States, insurance premiums are based on the population density in the area where the car is registered. New procedures, resulting from the 1998 Automobile Cost Insurance Reduction Act, have been proposed by the NJ Department of Banking and Insurance. The rules would allow for re-mapping and recounting of state density levels during this fiscal year. They have not yet been signed by Governor McGreevey.

New Jersey is now divided into 27 insurance zones where population density is measured. Residents in more populous areas pay more. Under the new plan, 50 zones would be allowed, allowing insurers to separate urban areas from nearby suburbs when determining rates.

This will be bad news for city car owners and probably good news in first-ring suburbs. Of course, urban drivers have the most access to mass transit and walkable destinations, and may have shorter commutes. It is backwards to have the highest rates for people who likely drive the least, since generally, it is not car ownership that causes accidents, but the extent of exposure to traffic. The *Star-Ledger* has also noted that the state plans to discontinue a cap on urban rates, further punishing urban drivers.

In 2002, Texas became the first state to explicitly permit **per-mile insurance**, a system that bases rates on distance actually driven. It uses driver exposure on the road as a key determinant of risk, and thus rewards car owners who are frugal or efficient about driving, or who avail themselves of other ways to travel. On the other hand, under the proposed New Jersey system, a 50% reduction in miles traveled would produce only a 5% decrease in premiums. Commentators have also noted, however, that increasing population in the suburbs could mean higher rates across much of the state, producing something of a leveling effect. City residents will still be hit hardest, however.

Comments on the new rules are due November 6, and can be sent to commissioner@dobi.state.nj.us.

A primer on distance-based insurance is available on-line at vtpi.org/tadm/tadm79.htm. ❖

The Tri-State Transportation Campaign web site:

www.tstc.org

TransitChek Works, Still Needs Promotion

Results from a recent market research survey by TransitCenter, the marketer of TransitChek, indicate that the federal mass transit commute benefit, which enables purchase of transit passes with pre-tax income, is helping promote mass transit and reduce car use in the region. The benefit is only available to commuters whose employers choose to participate.

Between November 2003 and January 2004, TransitCenter interviewed 3,050 commuters in the greater New York City metropolitan area. Respondents were placed into four groups: TransitChek users, non-users, potential users, and car commuters.

28% of respondents stated that their employer does offer a transit benefit program, and of those 68% participated in the program. Over 80% of commuters whose employers do not offer commuter benefit programs would be interested in participating if their employer offered it. **14% stated that they did not use mass transit before receiving TransitChek.** 51% of car commuters stated they would consider switching to mass transit if the pre tax benefit (including parking) saved them \$1,200 per year.

TransitCenter believes two steps need to be taken to increase the use and the success of TransitChek: (1) the federal government should increase the cap on pre-tax transit spending from \$100 per month to \$195 per month, the current allowable level for the federal commuter parking benefit and (2) awareness of and accessibility to the program should increase.

In May 2003, NYC City Council Speaker Gifford Miller introduced legislation to require New York City companies with 50 or more employees to implement the TransitChek program, but the bill died at the end of the session. It was proposed to counteract the Metropolitan Transportation Authority fare hike implemented that year. For more about the program, visit transitcenter.org. ❖



Town Hall Rally for a Car-Free Central Park Loop Drive!

Tuesday, October 26th, 7-8:30 pm
Landmark on the Park,
160 Central Park West at 76th Street

**With: authors Jane Holtz Kay, Howard Kunstler,
Kenneth Jackson, City Council members Gale
Brewer and Eva Moskowitz and others.**

Transportation Alternatives
www.transalt.org

Calendar

September 8-October 30. Exhibit. *The Riders and the Rebirth of City Transit: 25 Years of Transit Advocacy* by the NYPIRG Straphangers Campaign. Municipal Art Society. 457 Madison Ave., Manhattan, 212-935-3960. www.straphangers.org

October 12, 8-4pm. Bergen County Transportation Summit. Hilton Hasbrouck Heights/Meadowlands. New Jersey. More Info: Dennis McNerney & Dept. of Planning and Economic Development, 201-336-6446, 201-288-6100.

October 13, 6-8pm. Exhibit: *3 On The Subway*. Opening Reception. Museum of the City of New York. 1220 5th Ave. Manhattan. www.mcnyc.com

October 14, 8:30-10am. MAS Planning Center Forum: MTA: Five-Year Capital Plan with Gene Russianoff of the Straphangers Campaign. Municipal Art Society. 457 Madison Ave (at 51st Street), Manhattan, 212-935-3960. www.mas.org

October 14, 10:00am. NYC DOT public hearing: Reconstruction of 22 Pedestrian Bridges in All Five Boroughs of NYC. Spector Hall, 22 Reade Street, Main Floor, Manhattan. 212-442-7033.

October 15, 8:30am. 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 on EIS for the rehabilitation or replacement of the Kosciuszko Bridge. NY State DOT. Martin Luther HS. 60-02 Maspeth Ave., Queens. 212-532-4175.

October 21, 10am-2pm. Full Legislative Budget Hearing. Nassau County. 5th Floor, One West Street, Mineola, NY. 516-571-6226.

October 26, 8:30am-12pm. 5th Annual Tri-State Transit Symposium. The Financial Future of Transit in the Region and the Prospect for Bus Rapid Transit in New York. Kimmel Center, 10th floor. 60 Washington Square South, Manhattan. 212-998-7545

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

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



Mobilizing the Region

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