

Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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NEWS

Pataki, Bloomberg Missing from Transit Crisis

With the horrendous scale of likely MTA fare increases and service cuts becoming clearer, the **Straphangers Campaign** asked “Where are Mayor Bloomberg and Governor Pataki and their plan to keep fares affordable and service decent?”

The MTA is facing large and growing operating deficits. It proposes to meet a \$436 million 2005 gap with higher fares and service cuts. Its plan to raise prices for 7- and 30-day MetroCards would come just 18 months after a 50-cent base fare hike, the largest in the system’s history. Severe cuts would close 164 station booths and worsen crowding and waiting time on buses throughout the city.

Asking the public to pay more and more for less is a recipe for discouraging transit use, undermining the region’s economy and hurting the most vulnerable. A \$3 increase in the 7-day card equals \$150 a year — equivalent to a 30-cent fare hike. City riders already pay more than their share — 58% of a ride’s cost, while the average for large U.S. cities is 40%.

Even with these harsh cuts, the MTA projects growing future deficits — gaps of \$695 million in 2006, \$801 million in 2007 and \$1.1 billion in 2008.

As a result, **worse cuts may be ahead**. The MTA has warned it may eliminate 33 of 190 local bus routes, end bus service at night on 95 routes, reduce subway service by 10%, abandon several LIRR branches and slash service on Metro North in 2006.

Straphangers said **the cause of the MTA’s woes is clear**: Leading pressures on the operating budget are interest payments on enormous debt for capital repairs and declining state subsidies. Debt service will double between 2003 and 2007, from \$800 million annually to \$1.6 billion. And state subsidies will drop \$220 million between 2004 and 2005.

Why all the borrowing? Because the state under Governor Pataki has forced the MTA to rely heavily on bonds backed by fares. Mayor Bloomberg has cut \$90 million in aid to the current transit rebuilding plan — the city is making the smallest contribution to fixing the subways in at least 25 years.

The solution is as clear as the problem: The MTA needs a new long-term revenue source for its needs, including the crucial \$27.6 billion five-year rebuilding plan it has proposed. And that will take the leadership of the Mayor and the Governor. ❖

Municipal Planning a Key to Fighting Gridlock, Says Lettiere

New Jersey Transportation Commissioner Jack Lettiere told the elected officials, business leaders, developers and civic activists of Bergen County that the traditional ways of attacking traffic congestion will not get the job done.

Lettiere addressed the Bergen County “transportation summit” organized last week by **County Executive Dennis McNerney**. One of the apparent axioms of the event was that Route 17 between Hackensack and Teterboro Airport must be widened. But Lettiere said that while the state DOT takes all the blame for traffic congestion, the agency generally isn’t consulted about development planning until new site plans are signed and sealed. But it is destinations — development — that generate traffic, not the roadways themselves. He urged that municipal and county governments collaborate on a general plan to make the Route 17 corridor work.

“Transportation has to be in on the ground floor, not the last thought,” when big developments are sited, said the commissioner. He also made a strong pitch for renewal of New Jersey’s transportation trust fund and of the federal transportation program. He said it would be shameful to bequeath a deteriorating transportation system to future generations.

Earlier, assistant DOT commissioner Dennis Keck told the gathering that if the DOT adds lanes to Route 17 but does nothing else, it would **fill with traffic again in two years**. He said the DOT wants to ensure that any public investment in road capacity yields sustainable benefits.

Widening Route 17 is not without local controversy because expanding the road’s right of way would require the demolition of many homes and businesses. ❖

Warrington Unveils Extended Bergen County Rail System

NJ Transit director George Warrington presented a new northern NJ rail plan to the Bergen transportation summit last Tuesday. Its most interesting feature is the connection of new light rail lines to the new cross-Hudson passenger rail tunnel NJ Transit is planning. That would mean direct light rail access to Manhattan. The new projects Warrington

identified were a two-branch diesel light rail system and a spur of the electric Hudson-Bergen light rail to the Xanadu/Giants Stadium site. These would be added to **the new cross-Hudson tunnel**, a rail loop around Secaucus that NJ Transit has developed as part of the tunnel project to give the Pascack and Bergen-Main lines direct access to Manhattan and the pending Xanadu commuter rail connection from NJ Transit's Pascack Valley Line

The diesel light rail lines would run from Hawthorne to Hackensack on the NY Susquehanna & Western freight line and on the Northern Branch freight line from Tenafly to Tonnelle Avenue in North Bergen. The Hawthorne Line would join the Tenafly line at a rail junction further north in North Bergen. **Tonnelle Avenue** would become a major rail crossroads where riders could switch between the diesel and electric light rail lines. From that junction, a rider could take light rail to Xanadu, points north, the Hoboken-Jersey City waterfront business districts or Manhattan. At least part of the funding for these lines would be obtained by saving \$1 billion currently allocated to extend the Hudson-Bergen electric line to Tenafly. The diesel light rail option saves money by eliminating big electrical infrastructure needs. Some kind of hybrid diesel-electric light rail vehicle would be needed to allow trains on the diesel lines to enter Penn Station or a new underground Manhattan station constructed along with the new rail tunnel.

Warrington said Bergen County had a high percentage of commuters to Manhattan, but compared to other nearby NJ counties, the proportion of its commuters using trains was low. He predicted strong ridership if the plan is realized.

Warrington's plan has a number of political advantages. First, the Hawthorne branch incorporates a long-held Bergen County ambition for a rail line that can serve trips within the county. It also may win Passaic County's support. Second, it ties transit plans for the northern NJ counties to the need for the new rail tunnel to Manhattan. If Transit can show that project as the linchpin for most New Jersey rail expansion aspirations, it improves its ability to win the big funding the tunnel requires.

The plan also raises several questions. Among them: Will the new Manhattan tunnel in fact have the capacity to accommodate higher ridership on existing lines as well as new services from areas as far-flung as Ocean and Passaic Counties? Does the plan to loop the Bergen County commuter rail lines around Secaucus make the expensive new station there obsolete within a generation? Can the timing, phasing and funding for the complex plan play out in a way that keeps constituencies for its various parts content over the long period it will take to implement? ❖

New Jersey Brings Transportation Taxes Back to the Table

As Bergen County, NJ DOT and NJ Transit discussed a variety of expensive projects last week, funding was obviously on most minds. **State Senator Paul Sarlo** has indeed proposed a special transportation district for Bergen County — the district would levy impact fees from developers and invest it in infrastructure. Such a slice of local funding could help boost projects in the district as they compete for federal and state funding with other New Jersey needs.

But the biggest action needed on funding is clearly the reauthorization of New Jersey's Transportation Trust Fund. The fund has tapped out its existing revenue streams, meaning that any future transportation capital program will need to be funded with new revenues. The conventional wisdom is that the legislature will raise the state gas tax after the 2005 state-wide elections, but there are signs that some of the state's leaders are worried about putting action off that long.

Some legislators at the Bergen transportation summit stood up and said they **were prepared to vote for a gas tax increase** to fund transportation investment. Assembly Transportation Committee Chair John Wisniewski of Middlesex County said he and Republican Peter Biondi of Somerset County had just introduced A. 3414, a bill to "restore fiscal integrity and enhance funding to Transportation Trust Fund." The bill does not hike the gas tax, but anticipates a tax increase by building measures around the trust fund to help keep transportation debt from bankrupting it in the future. It would also cap NJ DOT road capacity spending at 4% of the trust fund allocation, require an increase in local aid and prevent NJ Transit from using trust fund money for basic operating expenses like salaries. ❖

Port Leaders: Rail Capacity is Top Priority

For transportation officials and port terminal operators, one priority in meeting New Jersey's freight crunch is clear: expand rail capacity. As volumes at Ports Newark and Elizabeth continue to set records, quickly moving cargo out of these entry points has become more important than ever.

"We're not going to double the space for container terminals," Rick Larrabee, Port Authority director of port commerce, told the Foreign Commerce Club of NY last week. Larrabee said improving rail capacity was the port's number one priority, according to the *Journal of Commerce*.

The annual container volume doubled from 2 million TEUs (twenty-foot equivalent units) in 1994 to more than 4 million TEUs in 2003 at all terminals managed by the Port Authority. Volumes are ex-

pected to double once again over the next ten years.

Trucks are an increasingly difficult option. Major highways are congested, and traffic is expected to increase 48% by 2025, according to the NYC EDC.

Indeed, Port Elizabeth's rail traffic has been growing steadily in recent years. Since the 1993 opening of ExpressRail — a service that transfers cargo from ship to rail — tonnage moved by rail has grown an average of 17% annually, or **twice the average growth rate of containerized cargo**. The service—now managed by Millennium Rail, a joint venture of APM and Maher Terminals—was recently expanded from 10 to 18 tracks. But terminal operators worry that capacity increases are not being matched outside the port gates. At a NY-NJ Port Industry Day held earlier this month, Basil Maher argued for increased rail investment.

“We must quantify the railroad capacity requirement and integrate that into our planning efforts to make certain that the network will work in unison with the intermodal container volume expected to be handled at the port,” Maher said.

Maher Terminals supports creation of rail shuttles to distribution centers in Bethlehem, Newburgh and Exit 8A on the NJ Turnpike as a way of reducing truck traffic and clearing large numbers of containers quickly out of the port. ❖

A Super Solution ?

The Stamford *Advocate* recently argued in favor of turning U.S. Route 7 in southwestern Connecticut into a “Super 7” limited-access highway. This year's elections have indeed brought the project back into the limelight. Governor Rell told the paper that Route 7 was her “favorite road.” The governor said she wants to ease congestion on the road, but it is not clear she supports the Super 7 option or other alternatives to improve traffic flow.

Strong community opposition and environmental issues have stalled implementation of the 40-year-old “Super 7” expressway plan, even though ConnDOT has completed some interchanges and acquired property for the expansion. The 2003 ConnDOT Master Plan lists \$110 million for Route 7 widening and interchange projects. But, despite the *Advocate's* position, expanding Super 7 is unlikely to reduce congestion in Fairfield County over the long run. Instead, it will probably induce more driving in the corridor and put off more sustainable solutions that would connect local land use and zoning plans to better access planning.

The *Advocate* also reported that monthly ridership on the Route 7 “7 link” bus between Norwalk and Danbury is up 29% compared to 2002. ❖

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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, www.straphangers.org. 212-935-3960

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 20, 6pm. Monthly meeting with Metro-North and CDOT officials. Special time will be given to hear commuters' comments. Grand Central Station. Manhattan. Meeting will take place in a Metro-North Business Car, upper level. www.trainweb.org/ct

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

October 21, 12pm. Metro-North Railroad Commuter Council Meeting. 347 Madison Ave., between 44th and 45th, 10th floor, Manhattan. 212-878-7087. www.pcac.org

October 24, 9am. The Tour de Bronx: New York's Largest Free Cycling Event. More info and to register www.TourdeBronx.org

October 25, all day. Full Legislative Session and 2005 Budget Vote. Nassau County. 5th Floor, One West Street, Mineola, NY. 516-571-6226.

October 25, 6:30pm. Museum of the City of NY civic series: "Transportation." With Elliot Sander, Sam Schwarz and Diana Fortuna. 1220 5th Avenue, Manhattan. rsvp 212-564-4441.

October 26, 7-8:30pm. Town Hall Meeting for a Car-Free Central Park Loop Drive. Landmark on the Park. 160 Central Park West at 76th Street. Manhattan. (212) 629-8080. www.transalt.org

October 26, 7-9:30pm. Dutchess County Planning Federation Hosts: Bicycle Friendly Community Workshop. Farm and Home Center, 2715 Route 44 in Millbrook. www.co.dutchess.ny.us/CountyGov/Departments/Planning/dcpfshortcourse.htm

more calendar entries at www.tstc.org

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