

# Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

Number 488

January 31, 2005

## NEWS

### The Mother of All One-Shots

NJ Acting Governor Richard Codey is considering leasing toll highways to private operators to infuse the deficit-ridden state budget with new cash. Articles about the Turnpike idea cited \$10-20 billion as a possible lease price (not counting the Garden State Parkway or Atlantic City Expressway, which are apparently also under consideration).

It's unclear how far the state has gone in analyzing the possibility, or whether a Codey decision not to run for governor this fall might deter him from entering a long-term deal. Codey has in fact asked legislators for more time to craft a budget plan for the coming fiscal year. It's unknown whether he intends to hang it on something as untried and potentially controversial as a long-term rental of the Turnpike.

NJ citizens should have the full range of implications laid out for them before any deal is made. In any such plan, Garden State Parkway **tolls are sure to rise significantly**. The Parkway operates in the red today because tolls have been kept low by politicians. Parkway prices are subsidized by the Turnpike's surplus. If the Turnpike is leased, the surplus would shift to shareholders and a still-public Parkway would have to hike tolls to stay afloat. If the Parkway itself is leased, tolls would also need to be hiked so the operator could turn a profit.

More important are the costs and benefits of renting out the Turnpike. The state needs to show citizens how much toll money they would likely pay, including profits, over the duration of the lease, and compare that to what the state could use a similar amount for (after Turnpike costs). Toll and Turnpike policy also needs to be situated within an overall state strategy. A Turnpike toll surplus could be returned to the state's Transportation Trust Fund, to support NJ DOT and NJ Transit projects. On the other hand, the Turnpike Authority as a public entity will have a hard time significantly raising tolls, and a private operator may have more leeway to experiment with various forms of congestion pricing.

In any case, New Jersey needs to remember that 99 years — the duration of the lease cited in news reports — is a very long time. In 1906, for instance, the population of New Jersey was barely 2.5 million, average life expectancy was 49 and Ford was still four years from introducing the Model T. ❖

### Transit Hell

NYC Transit leaders may have gotten the message that their five year estimate for repairing A-C line subway signals was unacceptable.

But nothing has dented the agency's legendary incompetence in communicating service problems and options to its riders.

Although the newspapers have moved on to the whodunit story of the control room fire, transit-dependent Brooklynites are suddenly **living a daily commuting nightmare**.

Huge delays and outages are not just affecting A-C riders, but are spilling over into the interconnected G, F and V systems. On Thursday night, for example, signals went out at the York Street Station, halting V and F service and stranding many who had already spent 45 minutes getting from Midtown to Jay Street on A and C trains. G service has suffered a variety of rush hour meltdowns throughout the week.

NYC Transit communications to stuck riders have been alternatively lacking, garbled, ambiguous and much too late to help — anything but urgent and reflective of emergency conditions.

We propose the following **Code of Conduct** for NYC Transit customer communications during the A-C signal reconstruction:

- Customer service and information representatives be present in stations throughout the delayed lines equipped with real-time information about additional problems and their likely duration. NYC Transit is a long way from the information super-highway, but the fact is that it rarely uses the many telephones and radios at its disposal in the system to get timely information to its employees and riders.
- These representatives **warn people away from paying fares** at subway stations **where nothing is running**, or the prospect of service is a long wait away so they can seek bus or taxi alternatives without wasting time and money. Station workers have a maddening habit of selling subway fares to customers above the platforms even when it has become obvious that something is amiss.
- Transit managers get out of their bureaucratic holes and help make this emergency customer information system work. When things go wrong,

intelligent decisions about what advice to give riders needs to be made on the spot. The impression most subway riders get during problems is that no one is in charge.

Pulling something like this off will take leadership, urgency, creative management and a new sense of consideration for subway customers. That will be a heavy lift for the agency. But its credibility is now so low that it needs to take some extraordinary initiatives to restore it.

#### **NJ Transit: "Seek Alternative Transportation"**

New Jersey Transit train riders also **suffered appalling delays and service outages** this week because managers at federally-enfeebled Amtrak shut down a series of switches on the Northeast Corridor line due to "severe weather conditions." Amtrak owns and runs this key line through New Jersey. The national railroad's beggaring by the Bush Administration and Congress is preventing basic equipment improvements that could probably forestall these kinds of problems. Then on Friday, problems with Amtrak's overhead power system totally disrupted the morning rush and led NJ Transit to tell its customers to "seek alternative transportation." Transit told the Campaign it expected normal operations this week. Riders tempted to take shots at NJT boss George Warrington might be better off contacting Senators Corzine and Lautenberg to ask them to find a way to get the increasingly dead hand of Amtrak off of NJ Transit's neck. ❖

#### **Metro-North Weathers Blizzard**

Last winter's railroad-that-couldn't managed to offer **near-normal service** following the heavy snowfall of January 22-23.

In the winter of 2003-2004, Metro-North, particularly its New Haven Line, saw huge service outages as fine powder snow infiltrated older engines and other parts and froze the trains' workings.

Connecticut elected leaders and transit officials have worked hard to spare New Haven Line commuters from another service disaster. Though news reports have focused on the state's purchase of rail cars from Virginia Railway Express, a Washington-area commuter railroad, these trains are not yet rolling in CT. Metro-North officials told the *NY Times* that they sheltered-snow vulnerable trains prior to the storm, and used their most durable rolling stock over the weekend. "We have made a vast change in how we operate," Dan Brucker of Metro-North told the paper. "We don't strictly throw equipment out to do or die." ❖

The Tri-State Transportation Campaign web site:

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

#### **Suffolks's Crash Maps**

Suffolk County has created online maps that track traffic crashes that cause injuries and fatalities. The map shows the locations, dates and times of each crash.

"There are approximately 35,000 traffic accidents in Suffolk County each year....The purpose of the site is to provide residents, government agencies and policy makers equal access to information that will allow them to improve the decision making process regarding traffic safety issues," says the county's website.

The site shows strip highways with many driveways, such as Route 110, Route 27 and Route 25 with the most accidents. This is consistent with federal data compiled by the Tri-State Transportation Campaign last year that found Route 25, Route 27, and the LIE as the most dangerous roads in NY State. <http://gis.co.suffolk.ny.us/accident.htm#>. ❖

#### **Mayor Bloomberg Raps Pataki Transit Plan**

Mayor Bloomberg addressed New York transit construction needs last week, asking Governor Pataki to devote more to projects in NYC.

The mayor said he was "deeply disappointed by the failure of the Governor's proposed budget to adequately support the MTA's capital needs." He said, "Maintaining and improving our mass transit system is...**critical to the long-term economic health** of our city and state," and labeled Governor Pataki's budget plan for transit "well short of what is needed simply to keep the existing system operating efficiently."

Mayor Bloomberg also described Second Avenue Subway and LIRR East Side Access system expansion projects as "critical to the long-term health of our city and state" but said the governor's funding plan puts both projects in jeopardy. He said that "the one and only major new transit project that is included in the governor's budget is the one that New York City alone is paying for: The \$2 billion extension of the Number '7' line. This is just one more example of the City bearing the costs of the State's inaction."

He urged the state to do more, noting that New York City residents **pay more than their fair share** for transit and that the city would continue to fund the operation of the franchise bus lines the MTA is in the process of taking over. Bloomberg defended NYC's transit contributions, saying "We are, in fact, the only local government in the MTA's service area that has contributed capital monies to the rebuilding of the system over the last two decades."

#### **Transit Officials Unenthused**

At hearings on Governor Pataki's proposed budget, MTA executive director Kathryn Lapp told lawmakers

ers that Pataki's proposal leaves the MTA \$2.5 billion short on what it is seeking for upkeep of its system. She said the cash-strapped agency will likely have to forgo buying new buses and rail cars and postpone improvements to its stations: "You're going to have 45 to 50-year-old subway cars, commuter rail cars," said Lapp, according to NY1.com.

According to news reports, she also identified plans to install electronic signs at stations that tell riders when the next train will arrive as a likely casualty of underfunding. ❖

### NY State DOT: Potholes, Payments Ahead

Funding for NY State DOT capital projects in Governor Pataki's budget proposal is essentially flat.

It will likely **preclude major projects** or initiatives on the scale of the L.I.E. HOV lane, which has been the Department's largest scale capacity project during the 1990's and 2000's, and which may be completed next year.

Like the MTA program proposal, revenue sources allocated to a planned DOT 2005-2009 program cannot complete the \$17 billion total. The final two years require additional resources. In the DOT case, the administration is considering "public-private partnerships" to bring in new money.

The part of the program that is funded relies in part on refinancing bonds that the DOT sells via the NY State Thruway Authority. Executive budget documents admit that the plan will **further encumber the DOT with debt** and that it is set up to push fiscal pain off into the future: "As a result of the restructuring, debt service costs will be lower in the early years of the Capital Plan, but the final-term of the existing debt will be extended by about 13 years resulting in higher levels of outstanding debt and future debt service costs."

Also like the MTA program, continuation of current funding levels is unlikely to be sufficient to meet basic infrastructure repair and improvement needs. According to NY State DOT data, pavement conditions in the state improved from 42.8% in "poor" and "fair" condition in 1995 to 30.2% in 2000. But now they are beginning to worsen again. By 2004, 36.6% of the state's roads were rated "poor" or "fair," a decline of 21% since 2000.

The state's bridge conditions improved slowly from 30.9% deficient in 1995 to 27.4% in 2004 (with a leveling off from 2003-2004).

It is unknown at present if the DOT has compiled a specific project list that corresponds with the \$17 billion level or some higher requested funding level.

In testimony to the NY State Legislature over the budget proposal, NYSDOT Commissioner Joseph Boardman said it could make sense for the state to seek private involvement in infrastructure projects.

According to news reports, Boardman specifically mentioned the **Tappan Zee Bridge**. Since the span faces major structural problems and a decision about rebuilding or replacing it could entail a hugely expensive project, it remains to be seen whether it can be made attractive to private capital. Toll roads are probably the only transportation systems that could attract private investment, though Boardman seemed unenthusiastic about turning over freeways to private companies that would charge a toll.

Pataki's budget proposes legislation that would authorize state transportation agencies to enter into partnerships with private companies. ❖

### Sharper Focus for Nassau Hub

With the support of business, environmental and planning leaders, County Executive Thomas Suozzi presented details of his vision for the Nassau Hub last week. The Hub study, one of the region's most ambitious smart growth initiatives, seeks to densify land use in central Nassau and develop intra-Nassau mass transit projects.

The list of transit alternatives has been narrowed to bus rapid transit (BRT), light rail and automated guideway transit (similar to the JFK Airtrain). Study data appears to put light rail on top.

Capital costs of BRT range from \$330 million-\$1.2 billion, light rail \$500 million-\$1.4 billion and automated guideway \$730 million-\$2.9 billion.

Light rail may have an **operating cost advantage** over BRT. Initial ridership forecasts for two different alignments — one in the central Hub area ("core system"), the other extending south to Freeport and northeast to Hicksville ("full system") — favor light rail or automated guideway service. Peak weekday morning ridership would reach 30,600 with the full system, with 6,600 on the core system. BRT ridership estimates are 23,000 with the full connection, and only 4,400 in the Hub area.

Suozzi described a central business district near EAB Plaza that would involve **sinking the Hempstead Turnpike** and creating open space above; another CBD would be planned at the coliseum to mesh with Charles Wang's plan for a 60 story building. He said the potential is there for 7.7 million to 17 million square feet of redevelopment over 50 years. Residents and visitors would enjoy a pedestrian and bicycle "Emerald Ribbon," connecting Eisenhower Park, Hofstra and other destinations. Transit would serve these, and a "Golden Thread" corridor from Source Mall to Garden City Center to EAB Plaza would connect commercial areas.

The transit study should be completed this year. \$2.7 million in federal funds are in hand for an environmental review for the project, but the remaining financing for the plan is unknown. ❖

## Port Authority Budget: New Framework

Amid a tough fiscal season for state governments, the Port Authority's 2005 budget seems an island of relative calm. It includes \$1.7 billion in transportation spending, including the start of construction for a permanent World Trade Center site PATH station, new PATH train cars and various airport and infrastructure upkeep projects.

The PA budget will also pay for the initial study of connecting the **Long Island Rail Road** to lower Manhattan. The project has emerged as a favorite project of downtown business figures and leading politicians, but which transportation experts say will have very lower ridership unless it is integrated with the subway system.

In comments to reporters, Port Authority chairman Anthony Coscia indicated that a **toll and PATH fare hike** may be considered in **2006**. Such increases tend to be more controversial in New Jersey, and getting through 2005 would avoid them becoming an issue in NJ's statewide elections next year. However, toll hikes also cause an uproar on Staten Island, and a 2006 increase could land in the middle of the NY State race for governor.

The Port Authority also released a 10-year capital investment framework whose transportation elements are arranged in five "campaigns."

1. Transportation for a competitive export economy — linking major airports with economic centers. The theme mentions the lower Manhattan-LIRR link, airport improvements and LaGuardia ferries.

2. **Transit-based economic growth** — calls for economic development in transit-rich business districts. PA investments in transit could underwrite this in Lower Manhattan, Midtown's West Side (via Moynihan station and new commuter rail capacity from New Jersey), expanded Lincoln Tunnel bus capacity and PATH upgrades.

3. Efficient goods movement — continued PA contribution to **rail freight infrastructure** and a port inland distribution network (rail and barge) and road improvements near port terminals.

4. State of the art infrastructure — harbor deepening, Goethals Bridge modernization, new PATH trains, signals and smart-card fare media.

5. Seamless regional travel — high-speed E-ZPass, PATH smart-cards, outreach to other agencies.

The PA budget and 10-year framework makes no mention of the possibility of the agency assuming financial responsibility for ailing cross-Hudson ferry service. ❖

## Calendar

**February 1**, 6-9pm. Public Workshop: Review and comment on draft conceptual plan for Brooklyn Waterfront Greenway. St. Francis College, 182 Remsen St. Brooklyn. RSVP by 1-28 to [bmccormick@brooklyngreenway.org](mailto:bmccormick@brooklyngreenway.org). 718-522-0193.

**February 7**, 8am-12pm. *3rd Annual New Jersey Transportation Conference*. The War Memorial Building, Trenton, NJ. RSVP by 1/28/05, \$95, [www.allianceforaction.com](http://www.allianceforaction.com) 732-225-1180

**February 15**, 5:30-8:30pm. NJ Transit hearing on proposed fare hikes. Passaic County Administration Building, Freeholders' Board Room, 401 Grand St., Paterson. 973-491-7453. [www.njtransit.com](http://www.njtransit.com)

**February 15**, 5:30-8:30pm. NJ Transit hearing on proposed fare hike. NJ Dept. of Environmental Protection Hearing Room, 1st Floor, 401 E. State St. Trenton. 973-491-7453. [www.njtransit.com](http://www.njtransit.com)

**February 16**, 5:30-8:30pm. NJ Transit hearing on proposed fare hike. Camden City Hall, City Council Chamber, Room 201, 520 Market Street. 973-491-7453. [www.njtransit.com](http://www.njtransit.com)

**February 16**, 5:30-8:30pm. NJ Transit hearing on proposed fare hikes. John Wiley & Sons, 2nd Floor, Cafeteria, 111 River Street, Hoboken. 973-491-7453. [www.njtransit.com](http://www.njtransit.com)

**February 17**, 5:30-8:30pm. NJ Transit hearing on proposed fare hikes. NJ TRANSIT Headquarters, Board Room, One Penn Plaza East, Newark. 973-491-7453. [www.njtransit.com](http://www.njtransit.com)

**February 17**, 5:30-8:30pm. NJ Transit hearing on proposed fare hike. Somerset County Administration Building, Freeholders' Meeting Room, 20 Grove Street, Somerville. 973-491-7453. [www.njtransit.com](http://www.njtransit.com)

**February 22**, 5:30-8:30pm. NJ Transit hearing on proposed fare hike. Summit City Hall, Council Chambers/Courtroom, 512 Springfield Avenue, Summit. 973-491-7453. [www.njtransit.com](http://www.njtransit.com)

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

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



Mobilizing the Region

MTR#488 Contributing: Michelle Ernst, Menaka Mohan 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)