

# Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

Number 491

February 21, 2005

## NEWS

### Passengers Ask for More NJTransit Funding

At hearings from Camden to Patterson last week, dozens of riders, civic leaders, and a handful of elected officials spoke against NJTransit's proposed fare increases and for the state to create a **dedicated fund for transit operations**. (For remaining hearings, see the calendar last page.)

NJTransit has proposed raising fares an average of 15% (MTR #487) to close an estimated budget gap of over \$60 million dollars in 2006. This shortfall is calculated after NJT reallocates \$356 million from its capital program to help pay for its \$1.4 billion operating budget. Since 1990, NJTransit has relied on its capital program to fund about **25-35% of its day-to-day operating costs**, a practice that is unsustainable and threatens future construction and expansion work. The agency has also created new services, built new lines and attracted large numbers of new riders without enjoying sufficient operating support increases from Trenton.

Rider's testimony ranged from angry to heart-breaking, but overall one thing was clear: riders understand the culpability of their elected officials and that NJTransit's funding system is broken. Unlike most large mass transit agencies in the country, NJTransit does not have a dedicated source of funding from sales, gas, property, business, or other taxes. This means that operating allocations are at the mercy of annual budget negotiations in Trenton.

Yet despite the state's role in NJTransit's funding crisis, **only one state legislator** attended any of the six hearings. "I understand you need a steady source of funding," testified Assemblyman Mims Hackett (D-Essex,) who is also Mayor of South Orange, "and I will support you on that." Hackett is a member of the Appropriations Committee, and raised concerns that the proposed hike would hurt the most vulnerable people in his community. Hudson County Freeholder William O'Dea echoed his concerns at the Hoboken hearing, "New Jersey needs some sort of dedicated tax for transit," he explained.

NJTransit's presentation at the hearing stated that "the budget problem is not just a one-time problem," and that future fare increases will be necessary because of a "basic structural funding gap." ❖

### Hudson Yard Sale: Bloomberg's Zone Defense

This week the MTA announced that it was opening up bidding on the Hudson Rail Yards, but there was a catch: the Jets would get the benefit of a rezoning; everyone else has to bid on an "as is" land use basis.

The site is currently zoned for low-scale manufacturing. The state and Bloomberg administration have said they will override the zoning for the Jets to build a stadium, and that a rezoning is "unlikely" for anyone else. Because the yard is state property, the state could override the local zoning law, but with Gov. Pataki a supporter, other bidders may face an uphill battle.

Virtually every editorial board in the region quickly called for a level playing field, instead of one that is "irrationally tilted toward the football team," in the words of the *New York Times*.

West side city and state elected officials, the Regional Plan Association, Tri-State Campaign, and Straphangers Campaign sent a letter to Gov. Pataki and Mayor Bloomberg with a similar position: "Our region's transportation system would profit from a competitive bidding process, but only if all bidders have a fair playing field on which to compete. At this critical time for the transit system, we urge you to assure a **maximum return** on the value of the site for the MTA and the region's transit riders."

The MTA's own appraisal indicates the site would be worth **\$923 million** on the open market. At press time, Madison Square Garden, which offered \$600 million, including \$250 million for a platform over the rail yards (leaving the MTA with \$350 million in revenue), has been the only bidder besides the Jets, who offered \$100 million for the site, with the public paying for its platform. ❖

### Pataki's Budget Threatens Federal Transit Funding

East Side Access and the Second Avenue Subway were the only two transit projects out of 27 evaluated nationwide to receive "highly recommended" ratings in the Federal Transit Administration "New Starts" 2006 report. However, Governor Pataki's budget, which allocates only \$2 billion to the transit expansion projects, \$3 billion less than the MTA says it needs from the state for its 2005-2009 capital program, could jeopardize up to \$5 billion in federal

allocations.

FTA and Congress allocate state federal dollars based on a variety of factors, including state and local financial commitments. State and local governments must provide a matching grant of at least 40% — in practice state and local dollars make up an average of 50% of project costs. The MTA has said it needs \$5 billion from both state and federal sources for the 2nd Ave subway and East Side Access in its 2005-2009 capital program.

By shortchanging the MTA's capital program, Pataki's budget displays a weak commitment to NY's transit system to the FTA and Congress, and could therefore threaten the state's ability to get committed and future federal dollars. This could slow 2nd Ave subway and East Side Access' construction timelines or postpone them indefinitely. Transit funding is highly competitive (almost 200 projects are currently in the pipeline for New Starts funding), and voters in fast growing states throughout the nation approved over \$40 billion (MTR #480) in transit related taxes in the November election. In other words, if Governor Pataki does not increase his funding to the MTA, our federal transit dollars could end up paying for light rail projects in Denver or Phoenix.

In President Bush's fiscal 2006 budget, East Side Access received a commitment of \$390 million (total cost is \$7.74 billion), while Second Ave Subway (total cost \$4.3 billion) has the potential to receive funds from a \$159 million pool set aside for recommended projects (MTR #490).

#### **Connecticut's Bus Project Threatened**

Gov. Pataki need only look to Connecticut to see how neglecting transit projects can impact federal allocations. The FTA downgraded the \$337 million Hartford-New Britain bus rapid transit project to "not recommended" in its 2006 report. The decision to downgrade the project's rating puts the plan in serious jeopardy. In the *Hartford Courant*, FTA Administrator Dorn cited concerns about the plan's cost increases, and more fundamentally, CT's inability to finance the project and **its overall lack of commitment** to its transportation system. The FTA said justification for the BRT project, based on cost effectiveness and local land uses, were generally ranked positively. This means that the state could be eligible for funding dollars if it had its own finances in place. Gov. Rell's 2006 budget does indicate a greater transportation investment (MTR #490), but it may be too late for Hartford and New Britain residents eager for new transit. ❖

The Tri-State Transportation Campaign web site:

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

#### **NJDOT Designates Two New Transit Villages**

New Brunswick and Jersey City are the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> cities added to the state's transit village program, NJ DOT announced last week. 20 municipalities applied to join the popular program this year.

The state designates municipalities as transit villages for centering planning and development around a major transit hub. 15 transit villages are focused around rail stations; one, Pleasantville, is around a bus station. Jersey City is the only one concentrated around a PATH station (Journal Square). The goal of the program is to reduce congestion and sprawl, increase transit ridership, and revitalize urban areas.

The program is supported by a **\$1 million** dedicated fund every year, and municipalities are awarded "bonus points" when their local aid grants are considered for projects planned as part of the transit village. The Tri-State Campaign and other allies continue to call on the state to **increase funding for the program**.

DOT Commissioner Jack Lettiere, who has been praised by colleagues throughout the nation for his smart growth oriented transportation planning, noted at Tuesday's press event in Jersey City: "We can't build our way out of congestion; but can ease congestion if we build the right things."

Both New Brunswick and Jersey City received \$100,000 to support their planning efforts last week. Jersey City is planning 204 residential units, and already has two colleges and a movie theater within a quarter mile of the Journal Square PATH station. In New Brunswick, are 690 residential units planned close to the train station. ❖

#### **Spotlight on Trucks: Boerum Hill, Brooklyn**

Last week, the Tri-State Transportation Campaign joined Councilman David Yassky, Brooklyn Community Board 2 and the Boerum Hill Association to publicly pressure the city to make truck route enforcement a priority. The Campaign is working throughout NYC to raise awareness about stark truck traffic growth projections — a whopping 83% from year 1998 levels to year 2020, according to the Federal Highway Administration.

Since neighborhood streets are the first to feel the impact of traffic growth, the Campaign has been calling for NYC DOT to be more proactive in its truck management policy. Councilman Yassky noted that the City Council is holding a March 1<sup>st</sup> public hearing on truck-related bills, including Intro 366, which would dedicate a larger percentage of NYPD traffic agents to truck law enforcement.

Future truck-traffic awareness and enforcement events are being scheduled with other City Council members and civic groups. ❖

## NYC Car Owners Hit the Brakes

*Crain's* reported a 5% drop overall in NYC car ownership between 2000 and 2003, noting that the cumulative costs of driving, including auto insurance and gas prices, have increased dramatically. Other notable factors were fewer parking facilities and increased parking fees. Taking only standard vehicles into account, excluding categories like taxis, rental cars, and motorcycles, for example, the average reduction reaches over 7%.

### Change in Standard Vehicles Registered, 2000-2003

Bronx	- 10%
Brooklyn	- 16%
Manhattan	- 5%
Queens	- 8%
Staten Island	+ 2%

## New Visions Presents Lower Manhattan Update

New York New Visions, a collation of architecture, planning and design organizations that formed after September 11<sup>th</sup> hosted a meeting on Lower Manhattan's transportation plan last week.

The NYSDOT presented the three alternatives for Route 9A/West Side Highway currently undergoing environmental review: one would leave the highway as is with three lanes in each direction, another would increase the highway to four lanes in each direction, a third would provide four lanes underground and four lanes above ground. DOT still claims that a larger road or tunnel is necessary to accommodate increased traffic after the September 11<sup>th</sup> memorial is built. Opponents disagree saying huge costs, good accessibility to nearby transit, high pedestrian flow, and low traffic volume - before 9/11 the multiuse **highway carried only 100,000 vehicles** per day as opposed to 140,000 pedestrians - make the tunnel or larger roadway unnecessary.

Construction will begin next month on the new Fulton Street Transit Center, which will connect the web of subways and PATH trains that meet downtown. ❖

## TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



Mobilizing the Region

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## Calendar

### NJ Transit Fare Hike Hearings

All hearings are from 5:30 to 8:30, unless otherwise noted. Call 973-491-7453 or log onto [www.njtransit.com](http://www.njtransit.com) for more information.

**February 23**, Atlantic City Convention Center, Meeting Room #301, One Miss America Way

**February 24**, Freeholders' Public Meeting Room, One Bergen County Plaza, Hackensack

**February 24**, Toms River Park & Ride, 400 Highland Parkway South, Toms River

**February 23**, NJ Transit Info Session, Port Authority, Times Square Hall, 625 8th Ave, NYC

**February 26**, 1-4pm. NJ Transit Info Session, Bloustein School, Rutgers, Civic Square Building, 33 Livingston Ave., New Brunswick

### Other events

**February 22, 6-9pm.** Public Scoping Meeting for the Hudson-Raritan Estuary: Hackensack Meadowlands Ecosystem Restoration Study. NJ Meadowland Commission, Environment Center, 2 DeKorte Park Plaza, Lyndhurst. 201-460-8300. [www.nan.usace.army.mil](http://www.nan.usace.army.mil)

**February 22, 6-8pm.** *Freedom from Car-Dependency- the Key to Livable Cities*, Auto-Free NY with Prof. Hermann Knopflicher, Inst. for Transp. Planning, Austria., NYPD Downtown Center, 104 Washington St, 212-475-3394. [www.auto-free.org](http://www.auto-free.org)

**February 23, 3pm-6:30pm.** Regional Plan Association presents Fundamental Tax Reform Series: *Roundtable One: How Can We Afford Smart Growth?* Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy, Rutgers University, New Brunswick. 732-828-9945. [www.rpa.org](http://www.rpa.org)

**February 25, 8:30am.** Hudson County Alliance for Action, "Transit Village at Secaucus Transfer." Prime Suites Hotel, 350 Rt. 3 West, Secaucus, NJ. 732-225-1180. [www.allianceforacion.com](http://www.allianceforacion.com)

**February 28, 4-6pm.** NYMTC Meeting on the Transportation Improvement Program for NYC. 1st Fl., Spector Hall, NYC Department of City Planning, 22 Reade St., 718-482-4559. [www.nymtc.org](http://www.nymtc.org)

**March 1, 1-3pm.** NYMTC Meeting on the Transportation Improvement Program for Nassau/Suffolk. NY State Office Building, 250 Veteran's Memorial Highway, Hauppauge. 631-952-6112. [www.nymtc.org](http://www.nymtc.org)

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

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