

Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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NEWS

Freight Tunnel in Limbo

Mayor Bloomberg's election year opposition to the proposed cross-harbor freight rail tunnel **does not** of itself **spell doom for the project**. The tunnel plan has reservoirs of support throughout the NYC political, civic, business and transportation establishments, and there will be time after the mayoral election this November to sort out city government's official position on the plan.

The project probably faces bigger problems than the mayor's need to make up with local activists angry over the possible impacts of greater train frequency on the Bay Ridge Line in Brooklyn and trucks serving the proposed rail yard in Maspeth, Queens.

One is money. If considerable funding is not forthcoming in a federal transportation bill to continue significant work on the project, it is hard to see where the resources will come from. NYC and NY State are struggling to finance basic infrastructure upkeep and pay for needed transit system expansion, with little sign of an emergent consensus favoring large scale revenue measures to support infrastructure needed to keep the downstate region competitive in the 21st Century.

Another is **winning support in New Jersey**. One end of the tunnel will necessarily be in the Garden State. The former mayor of Jersey City vociferously opposed it, some NJ transportation planners remain unconvinced that the project will work and there are few vocal advocates for it west of the Hudson.

The local opposition in NYC also cannot be dismissed out of hand, as the mayor's recent statement shows. The tunnel project has largely proceeded ahead of a broad public understanding of the swelling tide of trucks facing the city and the region, or at least has been disconnected from growing concern and anger in the city about that problem. Outright opposition to the project will have to be balanced by other constituencies with a broader understanding of the freight movement challenges facing the city, and developing and organizing those will take time. ❖

MTA Faces Huge Budget Pressures

Plenty of news coverage has described the shortfall Governor George Pataki's recent budget plan represents for the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's 2005-2009 capital program. The Governor outlined only a \$19 billion five year program, in contrast to the nearly \$28 billion sought by the MTA.

A new report by NY State Comptroller Alan Hevesi's office also describes what the Governor's budget means for MTA annual operating budgets, even with the dramatically scaled-back capital program the Governor's plan implies. The paper describes **extremely troubling scenarios** that the agency and its millions of transit-riding customers may face over the next few years. Budget pressures could force the MTA to impose significant **service cuts** and additional **fare increases** in the near future, according to the analysis. The Hevesi report says the MTA "is facing its worst crisis since the 1980s."

The report predicts a \$181 million annual deficit in 2006 and a \$400 million gap in 2007 if Governor Pataki's budget is approved. If the MTA cannot find significant administrative savings to reduce the shortfalls, then riders may see serious service cuts in 2006, including the **elimination of 33 bus routes**, elimination of certain LIRR lines and reduction of nighttime bus and subway service, on top of 5% toll and fare hikes in 2007. The report says the MTA is conducting environmental reviews this year to prepare for the possibility that it will have to enact these draconian cuts.

The report predicts that by 2008, the MTA's annual deficit would total \$459, reaching \$834 in 2009, and \$1.1 billion in 2010.

The problem comes from city and state support not meeting the needs of MTA capital programs and operating budgets over the past decade or so. This, along with increasing health, pension and other costs, has forced the agency to borrow increasing amounts of money to pay for previous and existing capital programs. The report finds that if new revenues sources are not found, over half of the (dramatically reduced) 2005-2009 capital program would have to be paid for with new debt (more than ever before). Debt payments could make up **23%** of the MTA's annual costs by 2015. Debt payments in 2004 were 11.1%. Full report: osc.state.ny.us. ❖

The Tri-State Transportation Campaign web site:

www.tstc.org

Can NJ Transit Afford Ferries?

New Jersey is considering legislation to get NJ Transit into the ferry business. In mid-February, as the Port Authority ended months of speculation that ferry service from New Jersey to Manhattan could see a serious diminution in service, the New Jersey Assembly approved bill A.3674, authorizing NJ Transit to take over ferry systems that fail.

A companion bill, S. 2228, will be voted on by a NJ Senate committee this week.

The Port Authority's February action was a deal with Billybey Ferry Co. to shuttle 15,000 daily riders from Hoboken and Jersey City to Manhattan. The agreement, now endorsed by the Port Authority board, calls for the financially beleaguered NY Waterway to surrender its contract to operate routes in Hoboken and points south into New York City. The agreement allows NY Waterway to continue services on all routes north of Hoboken.

There are no provisions in the legislation being considered in Trenton to increase NJ Transit capital or operating funds in the event that the cash-strapped agency is forced to assume operation of ferry service. Hopefully, Transit will be spared the necessity of having to run boats. But **lawmakers ought to spend some time with NJ Transit's books** before adding to its financial obligations. The agency is in the process of raising fares and faces huge budget challenges in the years ahead.

The legislation and continuing uncertainty over how to manage and pay for ferry service lends urgency to a recent call by the **Regional Plan Association** for New York and New Jersey to work together to devise a regional ferry network. In a recent newsletter, RPA urged states to form a plan that includes details on who runs what routes, how to make the system sustainable and how to provide an affordable service to riders. ❖

Strike is Latest Blow to Bee-Line

The strike that has stranded tens of thousands of Westchester Bee-Line bus riders is the latest evidence that mass transit service in New York's suburbs **operates on an untenable shoe-string**, with virtually no ability to plan for the future.

It was certainly not unpredictable that the Transport Workers Union would enter contract negotiations with a set of demands that would increase Bee Line costs. The system looked like it was finally poised to adopt a MetroCard transfer system for its connections to Bronx subways, which would significantly boost ridership. But officials now warn that increased operating costs will put the system back into the red. As with MTA services, critical suburban bus operations like Bee-Line and Long Island Bus desperately need a general financing overhaul in Albany. ❖

B's and C's for NYC Cycling

Transportation Alternatives gives New York City passing if not stellar grades for bicycle-friendliness in the organization's 8th annual NYC Bicycling Report Card.

Outlined in its recent magazine, T.A.'s grades rate city cycling's progress across a range of issues in 2004, with separate marks for "government efforts" and "cycling reality." That's because however many parking racks or bike lanes are installed in certain areas, it doesn't necessarily affect the experience of most riders out on city streets.

For government efforts, "Progress: Momentum & Attitude," T.A. offers a "B," the same as last year's grade, and a "B-" for cycling reality, up from "C+" a year ago. The rankings cite **reduced car-access hours to Central Park's loop drive**, funding for greenway projects, rising bicycle usage statistics and positive good indicators, but also said the arrest of cyclists riding in the monthly "Critical Mass" group ride, proposed bicycle licensing legislation in the City Council, poor connectivity between bikeways and other factors weighed on the results.

In the "Overall Cycling Environment" category, T.A. gave government efforts a "B", up a notch from 2003's "B-," with cycling reality holding steady for another "C." These marks again cited the disjointed nature of the city's bike-path and -lane "network," and continued government inaction against the culture of aggressive and dangerous driving. "At the end of 2004, cycling conditions in most neighborhoods were still only tolerable enough to keep experienced cyclists riding and to encourage only the boldest New Yorkers to make bicycle commuting a new habit."

The top grade among more specialized topics is an **"A-" for bicycle access to transit**. NYC subways have a "common sense" rule that allows bikes on trains when there is room. The mark slipped slightly from 2003 because the threat of station booth closures will complicate access with a bicycle to many stations.

Although we have noted in past editions of *MTR* that bike access across the East River has improved dramatically in recent years, the bridge category earns only "C's" in both government effort and cycling reality. The low grades reflect ongoing debate between T.A. and NYC DOT over development of safe on-street routes to the termini of major pathways, such as those on the Queensboro and Manhattan Bridges, as well as the fight over the big series of protruding bumps on the Williamsburg Bridge bikeway (see *MTR* #492). The ratings are further pulled down by the Port Authority's odd decision last year to close the George Washington Bridge bikeway overnight.

T.A. also includes grades in each category given

via internet vote by its public –members and readers. These are generally lower than the marks handed out by the organization’s staff. www.transalt.org. ❖

Full Market Value for MTA’s Atlantic Yards ?

Last week, Forest City Ratner agreed to pay the MTA “full market value” for development rights above the Atlantic Yards site in Brooklyn, though does not identify what that value is. The company wants the site in order to construct a 19,000 seat arena for the NBA’s Nets team, along with a \$2.5 billion commercial and residential development. The MTA also maintained its right to select the highest bidder for any proposal, a significant victory for transportation, civic, and planning groups worried that, with the Jets stadium imbroglio on in Manhattan, the MTA could be forced give the rights away for less than they are worth.

News of the deal said came as the city, state and Forest City Ratner signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) agreeing to the terms. The MOU simply implies city and state support for the project, and **does not preclude the other necessary steps**, including an environmental review and approval by the Public Authorities Control Board. Also, there will likely be eminent domain lawsuits and fierce community opposition. Terms of the agreement state that the city and state would each contribute \$100 million to the project. Over the weekend, elected officials and civic groups gathered to protest city financial support for the project, attacking Mayor Bloomberg for a “stadium first, children last” policy.

Along with the Nets arena, Ratner’s development includes 4,500 residential units, and numerous large office buildings extending east along Atlantic Ave. from Flatbush Ave to Vanderbilt Ave in Prospect Heights. The MOU apparently does not discuss costs the MTA would incur as a result of the project, including relocating its storage facilities and providing more frequent rail and bus service to the area when the development is built out. ❖

Clarification: NYC Transit Ridership

Last week our "MTA Confronts Funding Crisis" story said "NYC Transit carried 7,043,240 passengers on an average weekday, for an annual ridership of 1.4 billion."

NYC Transit ridership, including subways and buses, is approximately 7 million on a weekday, but annual ridership is more than 2 billion, not 1.4 billion. 1.4 billion is annual subway patronage. Subways see about 4.5 million weekday customers. ❖

Calendar

March 9, 2-4pm. NY Metropolitan Transportation Council meeting on the Transportation Improvement Program for Nassau/Suffolk. Basement, NY State Office Building, 250 Vetran's Memorial Highway, Hauppauge. 631-952-6112. www.nymtc.org

March 9, 5-7pm. Permanent Citizens Advisory Council to the MTA LIRR President's Forum with James Dermody, LIRR President. 5th Floor Board Rm., 347 Madison Ave., Manhattan. 212-878-7087, www.pcac.org

March 10, 4-6pm. NY Metropolitan Transportation Council meeting on Transportation Improvement Program for NYC. 1st Fl., Spector Hall, NYC Dept. of City Planning, 22 Reade St., Manhattan. 718-482-4559. www.nymtc.org

March 14, 1pm. North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority meeting. One Newark Center, 17th Fl., Newark, NJ. 973-639-8403. www.njtpa.org.

March 14, 2-3pm. NY Metropolitan Transportation Council meeting to approve Transportation Improvement Program for Nassau/Suffolk. NY State Office Building, 250 Vetran's Memorial Highway, Hauppauge. 631-952-6112. www.nymtc.org

March 15, 11am. NY Metropolitan Transportation Council Annual Meeting. 199 Water Street, 22nd Floor, Manhattan. RSVP: 212-383.7200. www.nymtc.org

March 17, 6:30pm. Kosciuszko Bridge project stakeholders advisory committee. Jennings Hall, 260 Powers St., Brooklyn. 718-482-4683. www.dot.state.ny.us/req/r11/kosciuszko/kosciuszkohome.html.

March 18, 3-5pm. NY Metropolitan Transportation Council approval of Transportation Improvement Program for NYC. Spector Hall, NYC Dept. of City Planning, 22 Reade St., Manhattan. 718-482-4559. www.nymtc.org

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

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



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