

Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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NEWS

Only Halftime for Stadium Fight

Despite a raft of headlines asserting that the Jets and Mayor Bloomberg have reached the “end zone” in their fight to build the unpopular West Side stadium, the MTA’s vote in favor of selling development rights to the team does not make the project a done deal (since sports metaphors seem unavoidable, we note that *Times* sports columnist Dave Anderson more accurately described the development as a “first down past midfield”). In fact, just several weeks ago, before the surprise bid for the site by Madison Square Garden, the Jets already seen as already having a lock on the MTA agreement.

The **project still faces two lawsuits** on environmental grounds, including that filed by the Tri-State Transportation Campaign and NY Public Interest Research Group charging inadequate transportation and traffic analyses, and likely legal challenges to the process by which the MTA awarded the development rights to the Jets. It also has to receive a stamp of approval from legislative leaders. The latter have said they are in no rush to approve a new public authority to run the project and the \$300 million subsidy from state coffers the project requires until they see if NY wins the 2012 Olympic bid.

Probably most troubling in terms of transit, the Jets bid looks like it will **open another hole** in the MTA’s shaky **2005-2009 capital program**. The agency’s proposed rebuilding and improvement program requires \$1.4 billion in asset sales. Development rights above the West Side yard are the largest and most valuable MTA asset up for sale.

According to news reports, the Jets bid for the stadium site will produce only \$250 million during the 2005-2009 period of the capital program. The MTA will retain the rights to the area above the eastern half of the railyard, but any timetable for its sale is theory at this point. Every dollar the MTA misses its \$1.4 billion 2005-2009 target will have to be **made up by bus and subway riders**. The MTA originally appraised the entire West Side yard property at \$900 million. ❖

Prospects for MTA Fix-It Budget Looking Up

— Transit Expansion Left for Another Day —

As the New York State legislature passed its first on-time budget since 1984, hopes for critical work needed to maintain and improve downstate New York’s huge mass transit system rose. Though numbers reported by the press can be tough to follow with no accounting of various elements counted or excluded, indications are that the New York State legislature has come **close to raising the full amount** needed to fund the MTA’s 2005-2009 “core” maintenance and improvement program.

That is relieving news to advocates worried that Albany might sacrifice humdrum modernization of tunnel and track infrastructure in favor of expansion projects like the Second Avenue subway.

The legislature approved \$17.9 billion each for the MTA and the NY State DOT five year programs. Reports indicate that a .125% sales tax increase in the downstate region, along with higher mortgage taxes and auto fees, will help raise additional revenue. Gov. Pataki, who has until April 12th to veto any measures, told the *Daily News* he “reluctantly supports” the sales tax hike. Part of the total would be \$2.9 billion in state bonds that voters will have to approve in November. Specific projects to be included in the bond act are not now known.

Political face-saving, good use of money, both?

Over \$2 billion in the plan that legislative leaders reportedly want to devote to transit system expansion projects is murkier. It’s unclear what exactly the money would pay for, or even what projects. In addition to the Second Ave. subway and the LIRR connection to Grand Central Terminal, the MTA is working on a plan to connect the LIRR to lower Manhattan, which is favored by business groups. The MTA could also end up being stuck with any cost overruns from the Bloomberg administration’s plan to finance the extension of the #7 subway line.

The \$2+ billion won’t advance either the Second Avenue line or the LIRR-Grand Central project very far. It could keep some work going on them as a sort of **down payment** that would require a far greater allocation in the 2010-2014 program. That scenario, however, relies on faith that future politicians in Albany will do much heavier fiscal lifting than today’s have been able to accomplish. ❖

The Tri-State Transportation Campaign web site:

www.tstc.org

NY Roads and Bridge Funding: Treading Water

The 14-county downstate region needs more than twice what Albany appears to have approved for road and bridge projects by 2010, according to a report by Bruce Schaller for the NYU Rudin Center.

The paper offers four potential funding scenarios. Under the proposed \$6 billion or so downstate program, road and bridge conditions will deteriorate and congestion will worsen. A \$7.3 billion program would maintain existing bridge and road conditions but allow congestion to worsen, and a \$9 billion program will keep things pretty much as they are.

It claims a \$13.7 billion program will improve infrastructure conditions and reduce congestion to mid-1990s levels. The report was paid for the General Contractors Association.

The report says vehicle miles increased 20% in the 1990s, and that economic costs due to congestion have increased 81% from 1990, costing \$7.1 billion in 2002. But the report states clearly that building out of congestion with additional highway capacity is not an option. It contains a general discussion of anti-congestion measures like HOV lanes, fixing bottlenecks and intelligent transportation systems.

The report seems to only attribute increases in congestion mainly to growth in employment, population, and auto ownership rates, but does not discuss the contribution of poor planning that encourages sprawling land uses (Long Island population growth, for instance, is quite slow). It lists some controversial and essentially dead plans, such as the Long Island Transportation Plan, as projects that “might be included in a sensible mobility program” (but it also demurs by stating that it does not endorse any particular project). It omits any discussion of some of the potentially best bang-for-the-buck roadway congestion-busting measures out there — notably, **congestion pricing and non-stop toll applications**.

The report contains some interesting implications. If road congestion is destined to worsen, it may mean access to transit and freight rail in New York’s suburbs and NYC boroughs will become an even more competitive factor in business location choice than in the past. ❖

Progress for NJ Pedestrians

A.2605, a law increasing the fine for drivers violating crosswalk laws by \$50 and dedicating the revenue to a new pedestrian safety fund was passed by the NJ Senate on March 21. The bill, approved by the Assembly last year, awaits only Acting Governor Codey’s signature before becoming law.

But A.619, a bill that requires motorists to stop for pedestrians in or waiting to enter crosswalks, was passed by the Assembly in March of 2004 and has awaited a hearing from the Senate Transportation Committee for **over a year**. ❖

Bicycling in NYC: City of Two Minds

NYC’s transportation policy is to encourage bicycle commuting, and the city has invested millions to help cyclists cross the East River and negotiate a few city avenues more safety. Try telling that to NYPD Assistant Chief Bruce Smolka, who according to a *Newsday* opinion piece by cycling advocate **Charles Komanoff**, has testified in court that “The roadways are designed primarily for motor vehicles.” In the city’s court action to suppress the monthly “Critical Mass” bike-in, Smolka has said that while any number of cars may legally occupy a street, if an equal number of bicycles show up, they need a permit (from him). Seems it would be helpful for some of the NYC DOT’s bike-promoting brass to read the Vehicle and Traffic Law to the NYPD’s crowd-control boss (at least one judge already has), but we aren’t holding our breath. ❖

Transportation Alternatives’

Noah Budnick Badly Injured in Traffic

Much of the city in fact remains a potential death trap for cyclists. NYC cycling advocate and Transportation Alternatives staffer Noah Budnick was severely injured while commuting by bicycle in Brooklyn near the Manhattan Bridge on the evening of Tuesday, May 29. Specifics of the incident are unclear as of this writing, though some accounts have said it involved a truck that left the scene. Noah remains hospitalized. At the Tri-State Transportation Campaign, we regard Noah as one of our own and are deeply saddened by his injury. We wish him a complete and speedy recovery.

Transportation Alternatives’ “CrashStat” GIS database shows that six cyclists were injured at the intersection of Sands and Gold streets between 1995 and 2001, near the spot where the incident involving Noah took place.

A statement by Transportation Alternatives notes that Noah’s “work has led to many miles of new bicycling lanes, hundreds of new bicycle racks, bicycle access to bridges and targeted bicycling education.” www.transalt.org ❖

Goethals Study Gets Going

The new Goethals Bridge environmental impact statement is underway, and has screened out several implausible project alternatives suggested during the public “scoping” process.

These include a Goethals tunnel, which the Port Authority says would cost far more than bridge options and a new alignment to avoid wetlands, which the agency says is prohibitive because of land acquisition costs and other land use conflicts. Also ruled out is a double-decked replacement bridge, which the PA says will cost more but not create any more

benefit than other bridge concepts. The agency says simply fixing the existing bridge will fail to meet its goal of creating safer lane widths and increasing its ability to keep traffic moving when vehicle crashes occur on the span.

The remaining options for examination in the draft EIS are a replacement bridge (removing the existing span), the previously rejected "twin" alongside a refurbished existing bridge and tearing down the old bridge for replacement with a new set of "twins." The EIS will also look at the possibility of new bus rapid transit and ferry services in the Elizabeth-Staten Island corridor and examine roadway pricing scenarios such as high-occupancy toll lanes and further peak/off-peak price differentials (the bridge is already subject to the PA congestion pricing toll schedule implemented early in 2001). The study will also look at the impact at the Goethals of planned and future rail freight projects between New Jersey and Staten Island.

Unless the PA seeks to advance a project design that would add to the number of traffic lanes in the I-278 corridor and thus promote a future expansion of the SI Expressway, the main environmental issues the project will have to address are likely to be wetlands and other impacts of building a new bridge in an alignment slightly to the north or south of the existing Goethals span. The PA anticipates hearings on the EIS draft in the spring of 2006. ❖

More Xanadu Lawsuits Filed

With active wetlands filling taking place for a parking structure for the Xanadu recreational and retail megaplex in New Jersey's Meadowlands, the NJ Sierra Club, NJ Public Interest Research Group and the New Jersey Environmental Federation last week sued the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, saying the the Corps **failed to consider a variety of issues in granting its permit for the action.**

The text of the permit appears to bend over backwards to accommodate mall and sports industry standards for parking, drive-up access and traffic flow, while doing little to suggest environmental protections. The project is attracting increasing local criticism over the strong likelihood that it will create a traffic disaster in the Meadowlands. ❖

Casino Critics Target Traffic

Traffic is a major concern of groups mobilizing a strong turnout at Albany hearings on Governor Pataki's plan to build five new casinos in the Catskills. NRDC, Sierra Club and several local groups will run buses from Sullivan and Orange Counties to Albany on April 5th. "Traffic jams for miles on Route 17" is one rallying cry.

www.dontgambleourfuture.org ❖

Bee-Line Strike Enters 2nd Month

A federal mediator is trying to break the deadlock, in its fifth week as of this writing, between bus workers and Liberty Bus Lines, the company that runs Westchester's local mass transit service. Newspaper commentary has called the dispute, which has caused all bus service to cease, a "quiet disaster" that is causing schoolchildren to stay home, transit-dependent people to lose jobs and increasing hardships for bus workers themselves.

The impasse could also **hurt the bus system in longer-term ways.** Although the attitude of many transit managers is that their customers have nowhere else to go, a prolonged service stoppage will lead some riders to change routines or find other transportation. Lower ridership could mean even smaller revenue and worse service than before.

Westchester may be able to turn that situation around if it is finally able to implement free **transfers** between its buses and subways in the Bronx, but that step has already been delayed many times because of the bus system's anemic funding.

The county and the bus workers have a big common agenda in getting Albany to put together a reasonable financing package for New York's suburban bus systems. We hope the parties can reach agreement and move on to that problem. ❖

Boardman to Washington

On March 17, federal and state governments announced that NY State transportation commissioner Joseph Boardman would leave Albany to assume leadership of the Federal Railroad Administration.

The New York DOT under Boardman has been marked by an openness to outside input and the beginnings of new policies. It has focused more on freight problems and railroads. That helped the Pataki administration implement railroad tax relief, lowering a high hurdle to railroad investment.

More recently, Commissioner Boardman launched a transformation of the NYSDOT whose results are still uncertain, but point the way to innovations such as joint land use and transportation planning and roadway pricing to ease congestion. They are laid out in *Trouble Ahead*, a report on the state of transportation in New York produced by a panel and public process initiated by Commissioner Boardman in 2004 (see *MTR* #484). ❖

Connecticut Transportation Funding Plan Still at Large

Connecticut lawmakers have until June to decide on Governor Rell's \$1.3 billion transportation proposal, which calls for a modest gas tax increase to 31 cents and other fee increases over the next eight years. Norwalk Mayor Alex Knopp and other members of

the Transportation Investment Coalition, a group that wants more transit and roadway spending, are calling on the General Assembly to raise up to \$5 billion.

In the meantime, CT Transit announced public hearings will start April 12 on a proposed 20% fare increase on buses that serve eight cities. Fares would rise from \$1.25 to \$1.50 in the fall, the second increase in 2005 (fares went up 15 cents in January). Transit officials say insurance and gas prices have increased in recent years while ridership has remained flat. But state budget documents also suggest that state funding for the system has not kept pace with increasing costs. For hearing dates, see www.ct.gov.

The *Westport Minuteman* reported that at a recent business event, Speaker of the CT House James Amann said he opposed raising the gas tax, even though he thought the state need more than Rell's proposed \$1.3 billion to pay for transportation upgrades. He also said he opposed tolls. Perhaps Amann aims to somehow print money.

The Connecticut Conference of Municipalities wants Governor Rell to increase municipal aid. While educational aid would rise in the 2006-2007 proposal, the Conference says Rell's budget reduces non-education aid by 4%. Budget documents indicate town aid road grants will receive a flat \$20 million each year. ❖

Regional Plan Association's 15th Regional Assembly

Beyond Red & Blue:

The Tri-State Region in a Changing National Context

— Friday, April 29, 8 a.m. —

Transportation panel:

"Financing transportation: a national and regional crisis"

- Thomas Downs • Emil Frankel • Louis Gambacinni
- Katherine Lapp • Janette Sadik-Kahn

www.rpa.org/ra2005/

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



Mobilizing the Region

Calendar

April 2, 8am-5pm. NJ Environmental Federation's 19th Annual Conference: Getting New Jersey Back on the Right Track. Jackson Mem. HS, 101 Conner Blvd, Jackson. \$30/person. 732-280-8988. www.cleanwateraction.org/

April 5, 7-9pm. Public Meeting for the Nassau Hub Major Investment Study. Nassau County Department of Social Services, Auditorium, 101 County Seat Drive, Mineola. 516-571-0431.

April 6, 5-7pm. NYC Transit Riders Council's annual President's Forum w/ Lawrence Reuter. 2 Broadway, btwn Beaver & Stone Sts., 20th Fl. Auditorium, Manhattan. 212-878-7087. www.pcac.org

April 11, 6-8pm. New York State Thruway Authority Toll Hike Hearings. Ramapo Town Hall, 237 Route 59, Suffern, Rockland County. 716-847-3403. www.thruway.state.ny.us

April 11, 10am., 2pm., & 7pm. Three Public Meetings by NJ Meadowlands Commission & NJ Department of Protection on a scoping document for the proposed Meadowlands Railroad and Roadway Project. One DeKorte Plaza, Lyndhurst, NJ. 201-460-8330. www.njmeadowlands.gov

April 11, 12, & 13. NJ Council on Special Transportation presents *TransAction: 29th Annual NJ State Transportation Conference and Expo*. Tropicana Resort & Casino, Atlantic City, NJ. RSVP: Frank T. Reilly, 908-903-1077, FTR4444@hotmail.com, www.njcost.com.

April 20, 8:30am-12:45pm. The NYU Rudin Center: Planning and Design with Communities in Mind — Context Sensitive Solutions in Our Region. Info: 295 Lafayette St., 2nd Fl., Manhattan. 212-998-7545. www.wagner.nyu.edu/rudincenter

May 2-4. The League of American Bicyclists presents: *Bicycle Education Leaders Conference*. Cyclist training, youth education programs, and educators in the community. Hotel Pennsylvania. 401 7th Ave., Manhattan. 202-822-1333 or www.bikeleague.org for info.

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

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