

Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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NEWS

NJ Transportation: Out of Money, Period.

New Jersey's transportation establishment has its work cut out for it if a recent *Asbury Park Press* editorial is at all reflective of public thinking about the state of transportation finance in the state.

On June 15, the *Press* urged New Jersey residents to oppose any increase in the state gasoline tax, claiming the Transportation Trust Fund is not in fact in crisis. The piece flatly stated: "There is no way to justify a tax increase of any kind when the state continues to squander hundreds of millions of dollars on everything from school construction programs, to government worker pensions and health benefits, to wasteful duplication of services." However, the Transportation Trust Fund is not used to fund any of these "wastes," and is indeed tapped out thanks to the borrow-and-spend transportation binge the state has indulged in for at least the past decade.

The *Press* further argued "The problem was fiscal mismanagement, the diversion of dedicated gas tax money from the Transportation Trust Fund to the general treasury, a pay-to-play system that provided inflated no-bid contracts to politically connected firms, and transportation agencies that serve as patronage pits for the political party in power."

Unfortunately, no amount of corruption fighting or fancy accounting will change the fact that **available gas tax revenues will all be required for debt service** as early as next summer. New revenue streams need to be established in New Jersey, or everything from pothole repair to train maintenance will come to a screeching halt.

New Jersey continues to have big ambitions for transportation improvements. Coalitions demanding new commuter rail lines and links abound. The *Asbury Park Press* has editorialized numerous times in favor of extended rail access between the Jersey Shore and New York City. These are things worth paying for and will foster continued prosperity in the state and region in this century. But New Jersey has to get clear on the magnitude of its transportation finance deficit. ❖

Will Albany Decamp Without Transit Plan?

— Jeopardizing Fall Bond Vote —

The NY state legislature adjourned today without the state's MTA Capital Program Review Board acting to approve the transit umbrella organization's 2005-2009 capital program. While the legislature's adjournment does not preclude action by the board this summer, it may make it more difficult to convene its members. The review board is a four-party panel made up of representatives of the governor, NYC mayor, state senate and state assembly.

Though a late MTA capital program is nothing new, failure to reach agreement in early summer could bode ill for the slice of transportation construction funding slated to be put before voters as an issuance of state debt this November. Without an approved capital program, lawmakers cannot assign specific projects to this bond act, and without a project list, it will be harder to pitch the measure to voters. If the bond act fails at the polls, it will mean \$2.9 billion for the MTA and NY State DOT will have to be shaved from the agencies' already underfunded five year construction programs.

News items over the past weeks have mentioned a number of issues that may be holding up the final agreement in Albany:

- **Inclusion of the #7 subway extension** in the MTA program. Though New York City funds would be used to build the project, some media outlets report that Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver has the same point of view on this project that he had of the West Side stadium plan — that it will cause development competition between the Far West Side and Lower Manhattan.
- The **ugly campaign** to kill the Long Island Rail Road Main Line/3rd Track project launched by several local officials in western Nassau County (see next page) is apparently supported by some of Nassau's delegation in the State Senate.
- The **elimination of 12 NYC subway station** renovation projects from the MTA's original capital program has generated a campaign by rider advocates and local legislators to re-fund them.
- Inclusion of the project to link the LIRR to Lower Manhattan in the bond act project list has apparently been an issue. Some parties seem to want the MTA

The Tri-State Transportation Campaign web site:

www.tstc.org

as far on the hook for the project as possible, while others fear tainting it with a possible rejection by voters.

- Some press outlets have reported that legislators are considering adding to the capital program — specifically increasing funds available for the Second Avenue subway and the LIRR link to Grand Central — with a form of borrowing known as “Garvee bonds.” The state would borrow against future federal transportation aid. It’s unclear why this would be any different than simply having the MTA issue more of its own bonds — in either case, it will add to the huge debt load the transit system already carries. New Jersey used the technique to postpone its transportation reckoning until after this fall’s election, but it will only require greater fiscal heroics later to pay off all the loans and sustain a functioning transportation system at the same time. However, other sources say the Albany powers are unlikely to add to the MTA debt load at this point.

Is it possible that other **creative solutions are afloat**? Last weekend, in a *NY Times* opinion piece, the Straphangers Campaign’s Gene Russianoff urged that available September 11 recovery funds should be applied to the Second Avenue subway project — “a subway line that carries people from Harlem and the East Side to work downtown.” Russianoff cited funds that are left over from the cancelled West Street tunnel project, the city’s budget surplus and precedents, like Westway, where congressional action was able to re-channel dedicated federal transportation aid. ❖

Smarter Fare System at PATH

It’s been over five years since the Port Authority and MTA announced plans to integrate their card system (*MTR # 244*), but such a system is now close to reality.

New turnstiles in use in twelve of the PATH’s 13 stations now accept either PATH Quick Cards and MTA MetroCards. The installation of turnstiles that accept both cards will be completed at Newark Penn Station before the end of July.

Another project to be completed by the end of the year is the introduction of the PATH “SmartLink” card which will allow passengers to add value to a card through the internet and better guard against loss or theft. The card system is apparently not a type of the true “smart card” some systems are beginning to use that work like an E-ZPass for transit users — it remains in a pocket or wallet but is scanned as a passenger enters a turnstile or other gateway. Such a system is badly needed on the region’s buses, where on-board fare payment, including the cumbersome “MetroCard dip” in NYC and Nassau County, is a big source of bus delay.

Drive Me Out to the Ball Game

The new Yankee Stadium will provide fewer seats — dropping from just under 57,000 in the existing stadium to 51,800-54,000 — but nearly twice as much parking as the current set up, up to 11,000 total spaces. The plan obviously sets up a **more car-dependent** and suburban-focused facility overall (the seats-to-parking space ratio will change significantly from 9.5 to around 5). Its environmental impact statement will have to plausibly explain how South Bronx highways and streets will accommodate 5,000 more car trips at game times. The study should start from the point of view that all the provided parking spaces will be used and not engage in the shenanigans with fan travel surveys that the City Planning Dept. employed in the EIS for the West Side stadium. The scoping hearing for the new Yankee Stadium environmental review is **July 18** at the Bronx Museum of Art (see Calendar for details).

The plan calls for NY State to contribute \$70 million to build three new garages and reap all the revenue from them. The status of the long-discussed Yankee Stadium Metro-North station as part of the plan has been vague so far. No new funding appears to be attached to the project in the new stadium deal. It would thus have to be funded via the over-stretched MTA capital program. The 2000-2004 capital program allocated \$20 million for the project pending a new lease deal between NYC and the team, but it is unknown if that money has remained in reserve for this purpose or not. The project is not mentioned in the proposed 2005-2009 capital program. It’s possible the rail station could remain at the level of another good idea, even as parking garages bloom in the South Bronx. ❖

Fighting Transit in Nassau County

Prospects for a third track along the LIRR Main Line were met with vociferous opposition by officials and residents of the village of Floral Park in Nassau County.

The campaign against the project is being whipped up by **Floral Park mayor Phil Guarnari**, who attended all three EIS scoping hearings for the project, but it has also received support from at least two Nassau County state senators, and the *NY Times* reported yesterday that the issue could impact the third track’s status in the 2005-2009 MTA capital program. Floral Park’s official web site urges citizens to fight the project and makes several false claims, including charges that the LIRR did not discuss the project with village officials prior to the recent hearings, and that the third track is a “money-making” scheme by the LIRR.

The LIRR “Main Line Corridor Improvement Project,” which would add a third track in the corri-

dor between Bellerose and Hicksville and eliminate a number of street level grade crossings is needed to add train capacity in both peak and reverse-peak directions. LIRR projections show the system operating significantly over capacity in the near future without system expansion. The grade crossings are needed to prevent additional train travel from fur-

T-Z Bridge: Two-Dimensional Gridlock

As safety conditions on the Tappan Zee worsen, the environmental review of replacement options for the bridge remains stalled.

Frustrated with the sluggishness, Rockland and Westchester County leaders have formed a coalition to speed up the project. The *Journal News* reported last week that the coalition has 17 members, including business, labor and environmental interests, along with planning agencies and elected officials.

Bridge safety ratings should pressure agencies to get moving with the study. One measure of bridge conditions is a "sufficiency" rating, which assesses the safety, service and general reliability of bridges to see if they should stay in service. A rating of 100 means a fully operational bridge, while a score of zero means the bridge should be shut down. According to national data obtained by the *Journal News*, the sufficiency rating of the Tappan Zee declined from 48.1 in 2001 to 31.1 in 2004. 2004 numbers were slightly better than 2003's 30.1 rating. The agency has put upwards of \$300 million into keeping the bridge safe in recent years, yet big holes in the bridge roadway still appear once a month, causing congestion and slowing commutes.

According to documents on the Tappan Zee corridor study website (www.tzbsite.com), the environmental review for replacing the bridge and developing some sort of corridor transit system is **two years behind schedule**. A stalemate between the project's two original sponsors, the NYS Thruway and Metro-North, led Governor Pataki to put the NY State Department of Transportation in charge of the project earlier this year. But little progress has been made since then. Apparently there is disagreement on how to narrow down the long list of alternatives a shorter list to be studied in the EIS.

Some transit advocates believe that as the study moves forward, a **rapid bus system** will reveal itself as the most suitable alternative for linking Rockland and Westchester by mass transit. This type of planning, which lays out roadways to move buses faster than surrounding traffic, is flexible to suburban situations, since it can travel off of dedicated alignments and into office parks and residential neighborhoods. A recent study by Columbia graduate students also recommended rapid buses as the best transit alternative in the corridor. ❖

ther snarling local street networks, and would in fact improve local circulation over today's conditions.

Although initial news coverage highlighted Floral Park's narrow point of view, a *Newsday* editorial today said the project was **essential to Long Island's economy** and criticized both the NIMBY effort to shout it down, and the State Senators attempting to pull the funding plug.

The LIRR should certainly do all it can to minimize local impacts, but the local complaints about it to us seem very overblown, and ignorant of the project's benefits. The local position seems to be one that would like to freeze time, but the fact is that the labor force, jobs and car and truck trips are going to increase significantly in the coming decades. Queens, Nassau and Suffolk are going to choke on traffic, chase away private investment and sacrifice their qualities of life if efficient mass transit capacity is not added in key travel corridors.

We think Floral Park residents will in fact see significant benefits from the project, including:

- More scheduled train service, since the project will permit more peak-direction as well as reverse-direction train runs.
- Improved traffic flow in western Nassau County due to the grade-crossing elimination elements of the project.
- Avoided traffic growth as railroad service becomes more convenient and flexible
- Reduction in train-horn soundings from grade crossing elimination

Additionally, the land acquisition needs of the project seem to be focused more in the grade-crossing elements of the project, which are generally supported locally, than in the addition of the third track itself.

The legislature has until June 30th to approve or veto the 2005-2009 capital program. If vetoed, the Plan goes back the MTA with recommendations. ❖

Transportation Conference Committee Faces Host of Issues

The Congressional conference committee to develop a transportation funding law to succeed 1998's TEA-21 is now at work, nearly two years after TEA-21 formally expired (a series of continuing resolutions have kept federal aid flowing to states and transit systems).

One action in the works is a move by New England House members, including Connecticut's Chris Shays, to build support in the House for the Senate provision that would increase the pre-tax deductible for mass transit commuting costs from the current \$105 per month to \$155 per month immediately, and to \$200 (the pre-tax deduction allowed for commuter car parking costs) in 2010. The measure was

championed in the Senate by NY's Charles Schumer. In our region, the change would benefit commuters who purchase expensive monthly commuter rail, or ferry passes, since the current pre-tax allowance more than covers the cost of a monthly MetroCard or PATH fare.

The biggest issue conferees have to address, of course, is the overall amount of spending the bill will authorize. The Senate bill would spend more, but the White House has threatened to veto a bill that authorizes the higher level. There are also structural issues to work out – the House authorizes a significant amount of money for new programs, thus draining money out of the “core” TEA-21 categories that pay for basic road and transit upkeep and improvement, while the Senate relies more on the existing TEA-21 funding categories.

In specific areas, the House bill creates and funds a new “**Safe Routes to School**” program, while the Senate calls for more proportional allocation of safety spending, directing funding for improvements for bicyclists and pedestrians in proportion to each state's fatality rates. The House bill provides more money than the Senate for congestion pricing initiatives, though conferees should increase its cap on pilot projects from 15 to at least 25.

Environmental groups say the Senate bill would gut earlier provisions requiring “conformity” between transportation and clean air plans, and would weaken environmental review of transportation projects. They say the House bill approach to is more consistent with current law and should be adopted by Congress in the final transportation bill. ❖

Whitestone Not Big-Rigged

Immediately following the start of major deck replacement on the Whitestone Bridge, the MTA announced it would begin to enforce restrictions prohibiting trucks over 80,000 pounds from crossing the span. The rule has existed for years but was not enforced. It will remain in force after work is completed in summer, 2006. When asked why authorities would now enforce the rule, Frank Pascual, MTA Bridges & Tunnels spokesman, said the agency had “started to see more and more large trucks; it was starting to become a traffic safety issue” and could become a source of bridge damage in the future. The change appears to be a testament to the surging number of big rigs plying NYC's and the region's highways and streets, a trend that is not being met by any clear or coordinated policy response. The MTA is directing heavy trucks to the Throgs Neck Bridge, which has wider lanes. ❖

Calendar

June 28, 12-1:30pm. The University Transportation Research Center presents *Smart Car-sharing and Smart Parking-Initiatives at California Path*. 199 Water Street, 22nd Fl., Manhattan. 212-650-8071. www.utrc2.org

June 28, 6-8pm. Auto-Free New York presents: Regional Rail-linking the suburbs and the city with George Haikalis, transportation engineer. Municipal Art Society, 457 Madison at 51st St., Manhattan. 212-475-3394. www.auto-free.org

June 29, 1-4pm. The University Transportation Research Center presents Smart Car-sharing and Smart Parking-Initiatives at California Path. New Jersey Department of Transportation, Trenton, NJ. 212-650-8071. www.utrc2.org

June 29, 5:30-7:30pm. Regional Citizens' Liaison Committee Meeting on Access to the Region's Core Draft Environmental Impact Statement. North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority. One Newark Center, 17th Fl., Newark, NJ. 973-491-8912.

July 7, 3:30-5pm & 7-9pm. NYMTC public meeting to review draft Conformity, Environmental Justice and Congestion Management documents. 199 Water Street, 22nd Floor, Manhattan. 212-383-7200.

July 12, 3:30-5pm & 7-9pm. NYMTC public meeting to review draft Conformity, Environmental Justice and Congestion Management documents. 199 Water Street, 22nd Floor, Manhattan. 212-383-7200.

July 18, 6-8pm. Public Scoping Hearing on Draft Environmental Impact Statement for the new Yankee Stadium. Bronx Museum of Arts, 1040 Grand Concourse. 212-360-3402.

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

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



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