

Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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NEWS

A World Leader ?

The New Orleans disaster casts a harsh spotlight on the dismal features of what passes for infrastructure, environmental and transportation planning in the United States. Consider:

- **Class-based attitude toward transportation/official “windshield perspective.”** Despite New Orleans’ status as the most traditionally urban, least car-oriented city in the American south, the pre-hurricane evacuation order took absolutely no account of the 27.3% of city households that did not have access to a private motor vehicle (see gnocdc.org). Transit-dependent citizens were abandoned to their fates by city and state governments and federal emergency managers. Compare to remarks attributed to one New York suburban county executive that the local bus system is not a matter of transportation, but is rather a “social program.”
- **Infrastructure neglect.** Despite long-standing warnings about New Orleans’ vulnerability to a large storm (including in a relatively recent FEMA report), funding for basic flood prevention and control systems has been reduced rather than increased. Compare to the recent federal transportation funding legislation, which authorized U.S. spending amounts over six years far below what any interested group says is necessary to prevent overall transportation system conditions from worsening. Compare also to the sinking city of Venice, Italy, where a national debate, scientific and engineering experimentation and major infrastructure investments to save the city have been underway for years.
- **Ostrich-like approach to environmental challenges.** Rising sea levels and warming oceans obviously pose increasing threats to coastal areas, making evacuation planning, flood management and a broad response to global warming urgent priorities instead of cause for post-catastrophe head-scratching. Robert Kennedy Jr. posted a column on-line this week noting the irony of Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour’s role as a fossil fuel lobbyist as the Bush administration was organizing its policy priorities shortly after taking office. Barbour helped ensure that the administration would take a hands-off approach to climate change. ❖

NYC: Gov’t Car Potatoes Do Twice the Driving

A new study released by Transportation Alternatives shows that New York City bureaucrats drive to work at twice the rate of the city’s general commuting population.

An analysis of the top 10 drive-to-work census tracts in Manhattan for T.A. by Schaller Consulting found that the #1 census tract in Manhattan is the area between Canal Street and the Brooklyn Bridge, which features the NYC municipal building, police headquarters and large federal court buildings. **46% of workers in the tract commute by car**, while 56% of workers there are classified as employed in “public administration.” The tract centered on City Hall and federal offices has a 25% car commute share, with 50% of employees within it working for government. The tracts around Wall Street and the World Trade Center (reflecting the 2000 census), see a 14-15% car commuting share. Midtown districts average an 11-12% drive-to-work share.

Overall, 33% of government workers in Manhattan below 60th Street drive to work. Schaller found that if government workers commuted by car at the same rate as finance, insurance, real estate and other professional office-type workers, there would be **14,000 fewer cars** entering the Manhattan Central Business District each day.

City agencies’ liberal distribution of legal and illegal parking permits has long been an issue for residential neighborhoods abutting government districts and for transportation and good government watchdogs. A 1999 *Daily News* exposé (MTR #236) found that city agencies doled out about 15,000 all-purpose free parking permits to city employees and politically-connected out-of-towners every year, with the **city DOT and police department** topping the list.

Lower Manhattan boasts one of the greatest densities of subway stations in the world, but city policy has essentially fostered generations of municipal car potatoes and needless traffic. Changing this bad habit could have a far more lasting impact, at least downtown, than ephemeral don't-block-the-box blitzes or the minor attempts to address congestion made by the Bloomberg administration.

Early in his administration, public interest groups lauded Mayor Bloomberg for riding the subway to

work, and urged him to cut back on driving by city workers. Bloomberg initially took steps to reduce the City Hall car fleet, but has done nothing about permits. Other cities, like London and Philadelphia (*MTR* #'s 351 and 454, respectively) have recently been more far more sweeping in reducing government cars and parking to cut public waste and rationalize government transport habits.

City agency heads like transportation commissioner Iris Weinshall have aggressively defended their chronic motoring as necessary for their jobs, but have never explained why the city encourages other workers to clog streets and pollute the air.

“What good is one MetroCard Mayor when we have tens of thousands of motoring municipals? The people who set city priorities should get from A to B like the rest of us,” said T.A. director Paul White.

The T.A. study calculates that collecting metered parking rates on the parking spaces currently used by government car potatoes cars would generate over **\$33 million** annually in revenues to the city. ❖

Forrester Paints Himself into Transportation Corner

The politics of gas prices have caught New Jersey politicians between a rock and a hard place — on the one hand, gas prices seem to be going through the roof. On the other, the state will completely exhaust its resources for transportation spending by mid-2006, and the state has traditionally paid for such investments by taxing gasoline.

Republican candidate for governor Douglas Forrester blasted rival Jon Corzine this week for refusing to rule out a gas tax increase. Forrester said simply that gas prices need to come down and did not address paying for the state’s transportation system. “I have already taken a pledge not to raise any taxes, but Jon Corzine has not,” said Forrester.

If Forrester wins and keeps his campaign promise, he will have to either divert a huge amount of existing state resources to transportation, **let the roads and rails decline** or resort to a huge one-shot deal like leasing the NJ Turnpike that may not be a good long-term deal for NJ taxpayers and commuters.

The problem for New Jersey is that the existing state gas tax is largely devoted to paying off debt for past transportation projects. No existing state revenue will be available for transportation projects at all after mid-2006. Repaving a single stretch of state highway or buying one bus will need to be done with new revenue. Ruling out any tax increase will make the job very difficult for Forrester. Corzine has said he would raise the state gas tax as a last resort to keep the transportation system whole.

There is no reason new transportation revenue must come from a gas tax hike, but the tradition has gained a life of its own, especially with reporters. ❖

Congestion Pricing and the Candidates

Excellent commentary and the entire text of the exchange by Democratic candidates for NYC mayor over congestion pricing and East River bridge tolls at the first Democratic debate (see *MTR* #507) are on-line at www.bridgetolls.org. ❖

Feds Threaten NJ Transportation Aid

Federal transportation agencies are contemplating action that would halt the flow of U.S. highway and mass transit funding to New Jersey.

According to a draft letter obtained by the *Star-Ledger* Wednesday, federal transportation officials are concerned that there is **no effective financing for New Jersey’s overall transportation plan** or its constituent projects. Specifically, the Federal Highway and Federal Transit Administrations may not approve the 2006-2008 State Transportation Improvement Program. The program must get federal sign-off for federal funds to flow into the state’s transportation projects.

The absence of an adequate financial plan stems from the fact that the state will run out of its own transportation funding next year, and no solution is visibly in the works. Federal funding requires various levels of state and local matching funds, so that a collapse of state transportation finance triggers the additional woe of turning off the federal spigot.

Watchdogs have pointed out the cracks in New Jersey’s transportation funding system for some time, and inevitably they are now they are growing into big, highly visible fractures. ❖

The Value of the Gas Tax

Gas price spikes sent politicians gyrating in several directions this week, but they generally called for **irresponsible revenue cuts** in exchange for good sound bites. If cutting taxes is the correct response to tightening oil supplies, there may well be no tax on gasoline within a decade.

The list of political figures working the issue is a long one. NY State Senate Majority Leader Joseph Bruno called on Albany to limit the state gasoline sales tax to the first \$2 per gallon. NYC Mayoral candidate Gifford Miller joined in over the weekend. NY State Assemblymember Thom Kirwan of Newburgh told the *Daily News* the gas tax is a “misery tax that we should get rid of now.” (He did not offer ways to fill the hole that would cause in NY State’s transportation budget.)

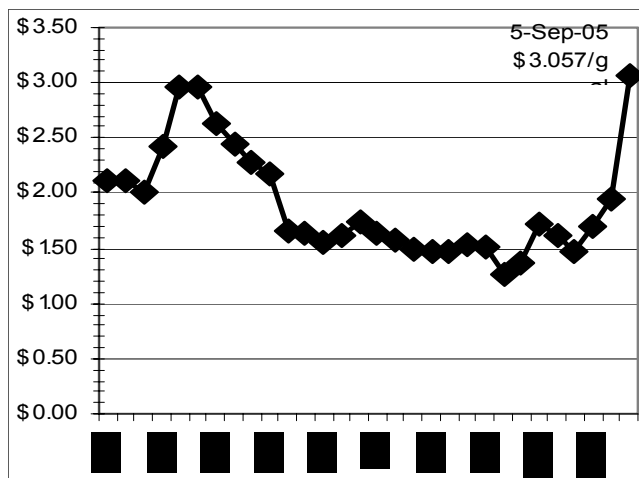
Connecticut Governor Jodi Rell, who drives 60 miles each way to get to work, called gas prices “ludicrous” and said she was considering temporarily suspending her state’s gas tax collection (after finally approving new taxes to pay for transportation infrastructure earlier this summer). State govern-

ment has already suspended Georgia's gas tax for the month of September.

U.S. Senator and NJ gubernatorial hopeful **Jon Corzine** said he would favor a short-term federal gas tax "holiday."

News reports offered differing opinions on how higher prices will impact various gas-related revenue, which is tied in many states to public spending on transportation. New York's *Daily News* reported that higher gas prices equal increased revenue for New York, since the 8.375% state sales tax on gas increases as price of gas does (however, the sales tax on gas in NY does not flow discretely into a particular fund dedicated to roads or transit — but perhaps any windfall in proceeds should be devoted to New York's cash-strapped transportation system). The *News* cited a \$40 million increase in New York's gas-sales revenue for the first three months of 2005 versus the same period in 2004. Data published in the *Washington Post* two days later indicate that over the long run, the opposite may occur for cents-per-gallon taxes — as prices rise, gas sales decline, producing an overall decline in total gas taxes collected. The *Post* noted that high gas prices this June and July gave Virginia less gas tax revenue compared to the same period the previous year.

The details of how gasoline and diesel fuel is taxed across the various states and levels of government is complex. In Massachusetts and NY's MTA region, a portion of overall sales tax proceeds contribute to mass transit operations. In many states and at the federal level, the excise tax on gas supports transportation infrastructure spending. New York and Connecticut also tax pre-consumer petroleum products and devote the revenue to transportation — these charges that are generally passed along to fuel consumers but remain obscured at the pump itself.



No denying the price spike

Inflation adjusted price per gallon, regular-unleaded.

U.S. cities average, 2005 dollars.

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

A possible divergence between **percentage taxes on gas sales** versus fixed cents-per-gallon excise charges argues in favor of the former as a transportation funding instrument. Since excise taxes on gas are now so rarely increased, they can be severely eroded over time by inflation, whereas revenues from price-responsive percentage taxes will follow the secular increase in prices upward. Unfortunately, where they exist, these taxes now are less tied to transportation than excise taxes, and they are the ones coming up on the political chopping block as prices shoot up. ❖

Pay to Pray or Park the Vote ?

NYC Politicos Seek to Cash in on Free Sunday Parking

Before Labor Day, Mayor Bloomberg vetoed the NYC City Council's measure to suspend NYC parking meter rules on Sundays. The Council has vowed to override the veto, but has not done so in advance of the Sept. 13 primary election.

Democratic mayoral candidates Fernando Ferrer and Gifford Miller pushed strongly to end what they called a "Pay to Pray" policy — unreasonable and perhaps unethical enforcement of metered parking rules near churches.

The mayor said the issue was one of traffic management, citing meters' ability to increase parking spot turnover and thereby improve access for more people to busy areas.

The mayor found support from three Queens Councilmembers, including transportation committee chair John Liu (Tony Avella and Helen Sears were the others). They represent districts containing crowded commercial hubs.

Transportation experts and advocates also opposed the Council's action, noting that unmetered **parking contributes to congestion** by increasing cruising for a space and double parking. Transportation Alternatives called on the city to preserve Sunday metering and to raise rates to reduce NYC's huge price differential between curbside and off-street parking. ❖

End the Cowardice: Ban Cars from Central Park

Transportation Alternatives reports that all of the major Democratic candidates for mayor with the exception of **C. Virginia Fields**, currently the Manhattan Borough President, support banning cars from Central Park. A recent e-mail notice from T.A. said **Fernando Ferrer**, former Bronx Borough President, was a car-free park's most vocal proponent, stating "The sky won't fall if you can't use

The Tri-State Transportation Campaign web site:

www.tstc.org

parks for driving.” T.A. had previously enlisted the support of City Council Speaker **Gifford Miller**, also a mayoral candidate, for a car-free park.

The **Bloomberg administration** recently announced the closure of more park entrances and an extension of car-free park hours. However, shutting seldom-used entrances and closing the park during off-peak traffic periods won’t make the eventual closure of the entire park any easier. Instead, it skirts the main issue and continues the series of less-than-half measures on park traffic undertaken by the last handful of city administrations.

Banning cars from Central Park will make a few city and suburban motorists and some taxi industry figures angry and the mayor who does it will take some lumps from these people. Big deal. They’ve had their run of the park for decades. **Ferrer is right**: it will be popular with many, many more voters. In this day and age, it will be easier to pull off than busting up the Board of Education or banning smoking in NYC bars. ❖

A Union Win vs. Train Automation

In a 19-page ruling released August 30, an arbitrator ruled that the MTA policy of removing conductors from the Brooklyn-Manhattan L-subway line **violated the labor agreement between** the MTA and Transport Workers Union Local 100. It said conductors are to be restored to their posts immediately, to the satisfaction of advocates and union leaders. The Straphangers Campaign’s Gene Russianoff told the *NY Times* “It makes no sense in an age of terrorism to leave only one person at the front of a train that might be carrying more than 2,000 people.”

However, transit officials have refused to return conductors to the L, stating they might appeal the ruling in court. NYC Transit plans to remove conductors from the 7, J and N lines in 2007 and 2008. The ruling does not affect one-person operation of short shuttle lines. The MTA and TWU Local 100 will negotiate a new contract this December — the issue is likely to feature prominently.

The arbitrator’s decision was not based on safety concerns. Rather, he found that removal of conductors from the L Train requires train operators to perform duties beyond those outlined in their contract. Adding new responsibilities to the operators’ job would require a new deal.

Our past coverage of the issue (*MTR #489*) distinguished between the essential job of modernizing subway signals and automating train operations. The \$288 million project to install Communications-Based Train Control can help increase train frequency on crowded lines like the L. ❖

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Calendar

September 12, 1 p.m. North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority—vote on preferred alternative for new NJ-Manhattan commuter rail tunnel. 1 Newark Center, 17th floor. 973-639-8400.

September 14, 9:00 a.m. Special MTA board meeting to consider Forest City Ratner proposal to purchase LIRR Vanderbilt Yard in Brooklyn for large scale development plan. 347 Madison Ave., Manhattan. 212-878-7440. www.mta.info

September 15, 10 a.m. New Jersey Highlands Council. Development of Highlands plan and other topics. 100 North Road, Chester, NJ 908-879-6737 www.njhighlandscouncil.org

September 21, Noon. NYMTC brown-bag lunch series: Bronx Community College sustainable energy program. 199 Water Street 22nd floor, Manhattan. Rsvp a must. 212-383-7200.

September 21 Long Island Sound Ferry Coalition meeting, City Hall Annex, Conference Room "C", 999 Broad Street, Bridgeport CT. 212-383-7250. Discussion of ferry emissions reduction.

September 22, 9 a.m. New Jersey Transit Board Meeting. NJ Transit headquarters, One Penn Plaza E., 9th fl., Newark. 800-772-2222.

September 29, 9 a.m. Regular MTA board meeting. 347 Madison Avenue, 5th floor. Manhattan. 212-878-

September 29, 6:30-8:30pm. Tri-State Transportation Campaign 10 year Anniversary Gala, Manhattan. If you are interested in attending and have not received further information from us about the event, please contact us at 212-268-7474.

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

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