

Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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NEWS

Corzine Says No to Higher Gas Tax, Promotes Borrowing Against Tolls

In a New Jersey gubernatorial debate last week, both Democrat Jon Corzine and Republican Doug Forrester said they would not seek to increase the state gasoline tax to breathe life into New Jersey's limping transportation finance system.

The position was a new one for Corzine, who until now had held out a possible gas tax hike as a last resort to sustain investment in transportation. His shift reflects the new politics of high gas prices and his narrowing lead over Forrester in opinion polls.

Unlike Forrester, however, Corzine did present specific ideas for finding new transportation money. Though some newspapers reported that Corzine would "lease out" the New Jersey Turnpike, his position is somewhat different. Although Corzine appears to think that leasing the Turnpike to a private operator should be considered, he has recently talked more animatedly about "securitizing" revenue from the toll road agencies. That appears to mean borrowing more heavily against toll revenues than the Turnpike and Garden State Parkway currently do, and using the proceeds across the state transportation system rather than only on the toll roads themselves.

There are undoubtedly limits to yet another borrowing strategy, and the Corzine camp has offered no numbers related to the strategy. It is likely to be a stop-gap measure that would buy time for a new administration to investigate other options and hope that gas prices fall significantly. Time is getting short for any strategy, since the state **Transportation Trust Fund** will be entirely **consumed with debt service payments by mid-2006**.

In the debate, Forrester repeated his opposition to any gas tax increase, stating again that money could be found to pay for transportation within existing state revenue sources. He offered no specifics as to what other state programs might be deeply cut in order to create more funds for the Trust Fund. ❖

MTA Surplus: Holiday Discounts

Part of the thinking behind the MTA's proposal to offer a variety of significant fare discounts between Thanksgiving and the New Year is likely fear that political leaders will find ways to appropriate the build-up of transit operating funds for other purposes. That problem has been seen in recent memory — Governor Pataki and then-Mayor Giuliani imposed deep cuts in state and city aid to transit operations during the 1990s when the MTA experienced higher-than-anticipated revenues (*MTR #8*).

The mix of uses for the surplus that staff are likely to propose to the MTA board is:

- \$450 million for a partial pension pay-down, which will save annual costs to the transit system for some time;
- \$100 million for the fare discounts;
- \$100 million to cover additional security costs;
- \$50 million in service improvements.

From a political point of view, it may be **difficult for elected officials** with other designs on the money **to oppose the package**. Some squabbling over the distribution of discounts between commuter rail and city transit is likely — *Newsday* fanned these flames with an article today but ignored the fact that the roughly 25% of Long Island transit riders who use the MetroCard-based Nassau County bus system would get the same discount package as city subway and bus riders. ❖

Federal Billions at Stake in NY Bond Act

A letter to the editor of the *NY Post* by MTA Chair Peter Kalikow warns that failure of the 2005 NY Transportation Bond Act will lead to cuts in key infrastructure investments, with serious economic consequences: "What will deter companies from coming to New York is a transportation system that cannot move their employees are the tri-state region." Kalikow points out that the proceeds from the Bond Act will provide the local match for **billions in federal aid** ready to flow into the LIRR link to Grand Central Terminal and the Second Avenue subway. "If the Bond Act fails, that \$4 billion in federal funds will be sent to some other state whose residents are far-sighted enough to see that long-term benefits of major capital projects far outweigh the local costs," he wrote. ❖

The Tri-State Transportation Campaign web site:

www.tstc.org

NJ Denounces Step to Dismantle Amtrak

On September 22, Amtrak's Board of Directors met and voted to place the Northeast Corridor (NEC), the rail line that runs from Washington, D.C. to Boston, under the control of a joint state-federal subsidiary. The decision was not announced until October 12, almost three weeks later.

Criticism of the plan has been swift. **Congressman Robert Menendez** (D-NJ) pointed out in a letter to the Board that as recently as April they had released a statement that removal of the NEC was undoable at the time.

"It appears that, in the absence of public support, the administration is now trying to use its hand-picked Board to take steps that have never been approved by nor explained to Congress. Your decision to hold the vote in secret and shield the outcome from public scrutiny only reinforces the conclusion that this administration has no commitment to rail service in this country or to the riders that depend on it," claimed Menendez. The vote of the board requires no action by Congress to become policy.

There are also concerns that this plan is to shift the burden of upkeep on the NEC to the States, even as the tracks and bridges have been allowed to fall into disrepair. The Associated Press quotes New Jersey Department of Transportation Commissioner Jack Lettiere as having "grave concerns" over taking over a "system that is in a state of disrepair."

Providing local control to the tracks could also effectively **end long-distance, high speed trains**, as local agencies would more likely give preferential treatment to their local trains over those of another agency.

In related news, Amtrak is discontinuing its "Clocker" service between Philadelphia and New York City. However, NJ Transit will be replacing the service with two express trains and three regular trains that will run on the Northeast Corridor Line during morning rush hour. ❖

Help Name THE Tunnel

NJ Transit plans to build a new rail tunnel under the Hudson River into Penn Station. The vital project would double west of the Hudson transit capacity into Midtown Manhattan.

Unfortunately, this highly important project has a history of bad names.

The tunnel was originally named ARC, or Access to the Region's Core, which was replaced more recently with THE, or Trans-Hudson Express, Tunnel.

Help this important project find a name it deserves! Send your ideas to us at tstc@tstc.org. We will print ideas in *MTR* and forward them to NJ Transit. ❖

Better PATH Trains

Port Authority leaders are set to unveil a new generation of PATH train cars at a news event today. The PA says the new fleet will be just one piece of \$3 billion the agency expects to invest in overall PATH system and service upgrades. That will likely include station renovations and especially **signal improvements**. Signals in the PATH's Hudson tunnel to the World Trade Center site were modernized when it was brought back on line as part of the recovery from the Sept. 11 attacks. Upgrades in the rest of the aging system will likely mean **faster trips**.

Over the past year, Port Authority officials have also consistently made strong statements about investing billions in the plan to build additional passenger rail capacity between New Jersey and Manhattan. The PA also has plans to continue to build rail capacity at and near port terminals, replace the Goethals Bridge and continue work at all of the region's major airports. The agency recently broke ground on the World Trade Center transit hub, a project mainly funded by the federal government. ❖

Transportation District for Staten Island Track?

Hoping to gain support for its NASCAR racetrack plan for Staten Island, the International Speedway Corp has proposed creation of a transportation improvement district. The idea is that taxes from the race track would be channeled directly into Staten Island transportation projects.

NASCAR has hit upon the fact that Staten Island is choking on its own traffic. Borough President James Molinaro, who has strongly opposed the track, said a transportation improvement district was "a step in the right direction."

However, a direct appropriation of tax revenue could present city and state leaders with a difficult precedent that reduces their control over public spending. Transportation improvements districts can hold appeal because they can help alleviate the impacts of new development by requiring the private sector to help pay for infrastructure. But it seems that NASCAR is proposing to put a portion of their tax payments directly into transportation on S.I., reducing the overall amount the city and state receive.

An additional concern is how the money would be invested. The temptation might be to channel money into highways around the race-track site, although Staten Island's daily gridlock problems cry out for planning that will allow for more intensive mass transit solutions in the future.

The growing popularity of transportation improvement districts nationwide is a testament to transportation need vastly outstripping the resources governments at large are willing to secure for them. ❖

Hope for Sprawling Connecticut

The problem of sprawl development is getting more attention in Connecticut.

All Aboard!, the Hartford pro-transit group, and the Center-Edge Coalition have joined into one group, 1000 Friends of Connecticut, with the mission of promoting smart growth and transportation reform at the state level.

In a recent Hartford *Courant* op-ed, Project for Public Spaces' (and 1000 Friends board member) Toni Gold called on Connecticut to question the new car dependent "Utopia" development, a proposed theme park and hotel complex in casino-ridden eastern Connecticut, and start channeling growth into existing towns and cities. She cites numerous recent reports, including one coauthored by the Tri-State Campaign, highlighting Connecticut's high rates of land use consumption, declining cities, disinvestment in mass transit and the overall lack of planning. She concludes: "This is an impressive list of recent publications from expert observers both in and out of the state, each saying the same things from a slightly different angle: **Connecticut is going down the wrong path**, and it's starting to hurt. Is anyone listening?" ❖

Cars OUT for Summer!



**Rally for a Car-free
Central Park
October 24, 2005
4:45 pm W. 72nd &
Central Park West**



1967 Car-free summer weekends



1979 'Recreational' lane added

2004 Five entrances closed
Extended car-free hours

2005 100,000 car-free signatures



2006 City grants 3-month trial
closure for summer?

RSVP

www.car-freecentralpark.org

Calendar

October 19, 9am. New Jersey Transit board meeting. NJT Headquarters, One Penn Plaza East, 9th Fl., Newark. 800-772-2222.

October 20, 1:45pm. NY Metropolitan Transportation Council meeting. Special presentation on business, environmental, social benefits of good planning. 199 Water Street, 22nd Floor, Manhattan. RSVP: 212-383-7241.

October 20, 12:15pm. Metro-North Railroad Commuter Council meeting. MTA Headquarters, 347 Madison Avenue, 10th Floor, Manhattan. 212-878-7087.

October 24, 10:00am. NYMTC Pedestrian-Bicycle Working Group. NYMTC, 199 Water Street, 22nd Floor, Manhattan. RSVP: 212-383-2530.

October 25, 6:00pm. Auto-Free NY meeting. "The Road to City Hall: What Candidates Are Saying About Transport Issues." NYPD Downtown Center, 104 Washington Street, Conference Rm. 212-475-339.

October 25, 5:30pm. Permanent Citizens Advisory Committee to the MTA: public forum on the NY Transportation Bond Act. 60 Washington Square South, 9th Floor. Photo ID required for building admission. www.pcac.org

October 27, 9:30am. MTA board meeting. MTA Headquarters, 347 Madison Avenue, 5th Floor Board Room. www.mta.info.

October 27, 12:15pm. [NYC Transit Riders Council](#) meeting. MTA Headquarters, 347 Madison Avenue, 10th Floor Conference Room. 212-878-7087.

November 4, 8:15am-4:00pm. "Planning Land Use and Transportation for Transit," by the Municipal Land Use Center and Project for Public Spaces. Ewing, NJ. www.njsmartchoices.org.

November 10, 8:30-10:00am. [Municipal Art Society](#): "Large-Scale Plans Removed from the Public Review Process - Case Study: Atlantic Yards." 457 Madison Avenue. RSVP to Maia Mordana at 212-935-3960 or planning@mas.org.

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

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