

Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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NEWS

Broader Support for NY Bond Act

Support for the NY Transportation Bond Act — Prop. 2 on the November 8 ballot — appears to be more widespread than in 2000. In that year, a transportation bond issue was defeated at the polls, largely by upstate “no” votes. The Business Council of NY State is urging voters to give thumbs up to the bond act. “The council’s leaders expressed concern about the state’s debt level,” said Council president Daniel Walsh: “However the board recognizes that voter-approved debt for long-term capital needs is an appropriate use of public debt.”

“It takes dollars to just keep everything secure, safe and travelable. That’s mass transit as well as roads and bridges. **This is not a luxury,**” said Senate Majority Leader Joe Bruno at an Albany event.

At a pro-Bond Act event in NYC, city comptroller William Thompson told the *Daily News* that if the bond issue is defeated, the MTA “will likely be forced to borrow more money and riders may be burdened again with fare hikes and service cuts.” ❖

Policy Journal Spotlights NJDOT Innovation

The cover story of the current *Governing* magazine is about the thorough policy changes launched by the NJ Dept. of Transportation in the last several years. As *MTR* readers know, NJDOT under Commissioner Jack Lettiere has essentially declared traditional highway expansion futile, and is working with municipalities to head off future traffic growth with good town planning. In some cases that involves new road capacity and even new streets, but the emphasis is more on place-making and densities and locations that can support walking and some degree of mass transit use.

Governing situates transformation in New Jersey within broader acceptance of traffic calming and “context sensitive design” (noting the latter is often superficial in practice) but acknowledges **NJDOT is far ahead of most agencies** by linking the problems of traffic congestion and land use: “DOTs have always assumed they had no choice but to keep accommodating more and more cars. Lettiere now believes the exact opposite may be true. ‘To reduce traffic,’ he says, ‘maybe we have to reduce the number of trips on the highway.’”

www.governing.com/articles/10speed.htm ❖

NJ Candidates Rule Out Turnpike Privatization

In their most recent debate, both Douglas Forrester and Jon Corzine said that, if elected governor of New Jersey, they would not lease the NJ Turnpike to a private operator.

The debate moderator asked each candidate whether they would raise the state gasoline tax or consider leasing out the Turnpike to a private concern (presumably in return for a large up front payment) in order to replenish New Jersey’s dwindling transportation funds. Forrester and Corzine have both already said they would not increase the gas tax. Corzine replied “to sell or lease the Turnpike or Garden State Parkway, no. Selling something to buy something else is a good idea. **Selling something to balance a budget is a bad one.**” Corzine said he would “securitize” toll road revenues—presumably borrowing more heavily against tolls. It is unclear that anyone in the debate or the broader public knew what the Senator meant, however.

Forrester tried to move the discussion to the theme of government corruption, saying he opposed selling or leasing the toll roads the Turnpike or Parkway because “the cast of characters that Jon Corzine supports in Trenton” would waste the money.

Forrester asserted that “We need to put the trust back into the Trust Fund to make sure we have money for the roads to be good pathways for the economy.” But he has continually declined to identify any real source of new money for transportation, which every analysis of the state’s financing predicament identifies as absolutely essential. ❖

Wonks Squawk, but Mayor Backs MTA Discounts

Budget hawks and conservative commentators seemed to react viscerally to the MTA’s proposal to include holiday season fare discounts among a broader spending plan for the downstate mass transit system’s greater-than-anticipated 2005 revenues.

In news pieces and editorials on Thursday, critics complained that a \$700 million surplus should be spent on such needs as unfunded pension liabilities, security and service. But in fact the lion’s share of the MTA surplus is going to exactly these needs.

“There’s no question that the most responsible use of the money would be to pay down the authority’s unfunded pension liability,” Edmund J. McMahon,

of the Manhattan Institute told the *NY Times*.

The MTA's plan indeed is to use \$450 million of the roughly \$700 million total to reduce pension liabilities, creating big annual savings in the future.

Only a **relatively small amount supports holiday discounts**, which have long been advocated to reduce end-of-year gridlock and bolster the region's economy. They also may cost less than predicted.

Importantly, **Mayor Bloomberg** has endorsed the spending package. Democratic mayoral candidate Fernando Ferrer denounced the fare discount proposals as an election season gift to Bloomberg, but that argument is hard to credit for benefits that will not take hold for straphangers until late November at the earliest.

Only *Newsday's* coverage explored the problem of transit budget cuts by the governor, state legislature and mayor that the MTA often faces when its finances are looking up. With its spending proposal, the MTA appears to have outraced any budding city or state move to steal the surplus.

The *Daily News* editorial board raised, in a crabby way, one of the most interesting and far-reaching facets of the issue: "The reduced fares will likely draw more riders. As more riders board, MTA revenue goes up and the cost of the discounts drops." The *News* is concerned that riders reap the full \$50 million give-back that the MTA has promised as fare discounts. But if the discounts come close to paying for themselves in the form of additional riders, it's possible that holiday-season cut fares could become a regular feature of the transit system.

Even critics of the plan agreed that that issue is worth exploring. "It's not a bad idea to experiment with differential pricing — and the weekends might be a good place to start," the Manhattan Institute's Nicole Gelinas told the *Times*. ❖

Get on the Bus, Say Some Nassau Leaders

The Nassau County Legislature's Deputy Presiding Officer Roger Corbin and Legislator Kevan Abrahams rode to work on Long Island Bus today as part of a challenge by the Tri-State Campaign and L.I. ACORN. The groups asked county leaders to try Long Island Bus service at least once before adopting the county's 2006 budget, expected Oct. 26th.

The groups hope to call attention to **growing bus use** and inadequate service in Nassau County, and want the county to increase its contribution to the Long Island Bus operating budget by \$4.5 million, to \$15 million, to allow for service increases.

Bus riders noted that County Executive Suozzi recently declared an end to Nassau County's fiscal crisis, but that bus service was still infrequent and crowded. County funding levels to Long Island Bus, though increased in recent years, are only about half of what they were in 1999. ❖

The High Cost of Free Parking 4: Distributing the Benefits of Parking Pricing

In the third and final section of his opus, *The High Cost of Free Parking*, UCLA Professor Donald Shoup identifies ways to overcome technological and political barriers in the way of charging market-priced rates for parking (we reviewed earlier sections of the work in *MTR #'s* 505, 506 and 509).

The first obstacle is relatively easy to address. Shoup describes several new takes on the traditional parking meter, which was invented by a member of the Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce in 1935. Most American parking meters haven't changed much in the 70 years since. But recent years have seen significant advances.

Pay-and-display and **pay-by-space meters** are used in New York City, Aspen and Berkeley and differ from traditional meters in that they control multiple spaces. They also have the benefit of allowing cash, credit card, smart card and even cell-phone payments. Personal in-vehicle meters, also employed by Aspen and in Arlington, VA, allow parkers to pay without stepping out of their cars. Drivers key the appropriate parking zone, insert their parking smart card, and display the meter in the windshield. Payment is deducted until the driver returns and switches off the meter. In several European cities, drivers pay for parking with their cell-phones by calling a city parking number and keying in license plate and parking zone (cell payment is also a popular way to pay London's congestion charge). An in-vehicle transponder allows control officers to determine if the car is paying and parked legally. The EU is also exploring using Global Positioning System satellites to pay for parking.

Beyond their convenience, the principal advantages of modern payment methods is that parking rates can be adjusted to respond to demand. During peak parking periods, rates can be adjusted upward to ensure a rough balance between supply and demand, reducing some trips and also cutting back on cruising for parking.

Of course the **bigger obstacle to charging for parking** (evident in the recent tempest over NYC metered Sunday parking) is **politics**. Resistance to increasing parking rates and putting a price on previously free parking is strong. Shoup says it can be overcome via **parking benefit districts**.

Under such a plan, the district would receive some or all of parking revenue, rather than see it disappear into a city's general fund coffers. The district would use the funds for transportation and commu-

The Tri-State Transportation Campaign web site:

www.tstc.org

nity improvements such as sidewalk cleaning, landscaping, storefront facades, bicycle and walking paths, etc. The establishment of parking benefit districts helps make metered parking more palatable to curbside shop owners and residents. Both groups can see a clear link between the coins deposited in parking meters and improvements in their districts.

Two southern California cities currently employ parking benefit districts: **Old Pasadena** and **San Diego**. Old Pasadena's Parking Meter Zone (PMZ) brought in \$1.3 million in 2001 and helped transform a dying commercial district into a vibrant and popular destination for shoppers and diners. The PMZ chair credits parking revenue for turning Old Pasadena around, saying, "This might seem silly to some people, but if not for our parking meters, it's hard to imagine that we'd have the kind of success we're enjoying. They've made a huge difference. At first it was a struggle to get people to agree with the meters. But when we figured out that the money would stay here, that the money would be used to improve the amenities, it was an easy sell."

San Diego returns 45 percent of parking meter revenues (amounting to almost \$2.2 million in 2002) to three Parking Meter Districts. An Uptown District uses its funds to revitalize commercial streets, improve the walking environment, establish focal points for transit services and increase off-street parking. San Diego's meters carry the mantra: "Small Change for Big Changes."

In residential areas, concerns about charging for curb parking can be ameliorated by giving residents the right to park for free. In this way, only "outsiders" are paying for parking, and their contributions go toward improving the neighborhood.

NYC recently introduced new parking meters which accept pre-paid smart cards for payment. This makes parking more convenient. But unfortunately, peak premiums seem a distant prospect while NYCDOT promotes **cheap and easy curb parking**. A new ad on its website invites Manhattan motoring: "Driving to the Theater District? Use On-Street Parking – Only \$2.00 per hour."

That said, Mayor Bloomberg, in announcing the new meters, noted that the new technology could allow DOT to one day charge variable, demand-driven parking rates. ❖

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



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Calendar

October 25, 6:00-8:00pm. Auto-Free NY: "The Road to City Hall: What Candidates Are Saying About Transport Issues." 104 Washington St., Conference Room. 212-475-3394.

October 25, 5:30-7:00pm. The Permanent Citizens Advisory Committee to the MTA: public forum on the Rebuild and Renew NY Transportation Bond Act. 60 Washington Square South, 9th Floor. Photo ID required for building admission. 212-878-7087

October 26. Sierra Club NYC transportation committee. Topic: NY Transportation Bond Act. Patrick Centolanzi, SierraNYCT@aol.com or 917-881-4217.

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

October 27, 12:15-2:00pm. New York City Transit Riders Council meeting. 347 Madison Avenue, 10th Floor. 212-878-7087.

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

November 10, 8:30-10:00am. Municipal Art Society Planning Center Forum Series: "Large-Scale Plans Removed from the Public Review Process - Case Study: Atlantic Yards." 457 Madison Ave., Manhattan. RSVP to Maia Moradana at 212-935-3960 or planning@mas.org.

November 22, 6:00-8:00pm. Auto-Free NY: "Light Rail in a Red State! Some Insights from Dallas and Houston." 104 Washington St., Conference Room. 212-475-3394.

December 1, 8:30am-1:00pm. "Can Growth Work for NY's Communities? Community Development, Social and Environmental Justice, and the City's Future." Pratt Manhattan, 144 W. 14th Street, Room 213. 718-636-3486 x2678.

December 5, 8:15am-1:30pm. "Creating Sustainable Land Use and Transportation Plans." Municipal Land Use Center and Project for Public Spaces. Colts Neck, NJ. www.njsmartchoices.org.

more calendar entries at www.tstc.org