

Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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NEWS

Route 92 Down for the Count

Critics of the proposed Route 92, a 6.7 mile, four lane NJ Turnpike spur proposed for one of central New Jersey's most environmentally sensitive areas, received good news earlier this week when the New Jersey Turnpike Authority **removed the project's funding**. Only \$6 million remains in a dedicated Route 92 fund, all of which is expected to pay for unpaid debts the project has created. The Tri-State Campaign has fought Route 92 for about a decade.

Opponents of the project celebrated last week. South Brunswick Mayor Frank Gambatese dumped a box of "NO92" pins in the trash, saying he wouldn't need them anymore.

While congratulations are due all around, there's the old New Jersey saying: "No road is ever dead until it is built." Turnpike Authority Executive Director Mike LaPolla told some news outlets that widening a southern section of the Turnpike is the agency's top priority, but Route 92 may be revisited in the future.

One way to ensure Route 92 is not resurrected. is for the legislature to pass a bill (A.1957/S.854) introduced by Assemblyman Bill Baroni and Senator Peter Inverso that would revoke the Turnpike Authority's authorization to build the highway. The Assembly Transportation Committee chairman John Wisniewski said he would not hold a hearing on the bill until after the Army Corps of Engineers releases its final environmental impact statement.

The Army Corps has not returned calls seeking information on when the EIS might be released.

The Turnpike Authority transferred the Route 92 money into an account for a project to widen the Turnpike between exits 6 and 8A. We urge that the **land use implications** of such a project be closely considered in its environmental review. It would be appropriate in this day and age for the Turnpike Authority to acknowledge and adapt the NJ DOT's new emphasis on town building and smart growth in considering how its actions affect the world beyond the edge of the pavement. ❖

Bias Still Shows in Tappan Zee Transit Ideas

A new Tappan Zee Bridge is still years away for Tappan Zee commuters, despite a recent news cycle about the sorry state of the span. But at least the Thruway Authority and Metro-North have settled on **six alternatives**, with four including new transit service along the corridor – either commuter rail, bus rapid transit (BRT) and two options combining commuter rail with BRT or light rail.

But with Metro-North Railroad — a purely commuter rail outfit — directing the review of transit alternatives, can an **innovative proposal** like **bus rapid transit** get a fair shake? The Tri-State Campaign attended a recent Tappan Zee presentation by Metro-North to the Permanent Citizens Advisory Committee and found the agency unsurprisingly biased toward commuter rail, with the BRT alternative appearing to represent an afterthought.

Metro-North handed out detailed schematics for each of the alternatives under consideration. These showed the approximate route for each mode, proposed stations, and some engineering details such as tunnel locations. As planned, rapid bus service would travel along I-287 from Suffern, across the Tappan Zee Bridge in HOT lanes, making 4 stops west of the Hudson. Once across the river, the rapid buses BRT would travel on dedicated lanes on Route 119 in Westchester, making 11-12 stops.

Unfortunately, the Tappan Zee bus rapid transit scheme appears to take no advantage of the flexibility inherent in that mode. Although we have heard conflicting accounts about this from the study team at several points, commuters traveling across the bridge to work in White Plains office parks (the largest commuter market according to a recent origin-destination survey) will apparently have to transfer to a loop bus to reach their offices from downtown White Plains. With BRT, it certainly doesn't have to be this way. As global transit analyst Robert Cervero has noted about Ottawa, Canada's large bus-based system, "the Transitway allows the integration of mainline and feeder services in a single vehicle." One can easily envision a BRT system which has a variety of separate services that depart from Rt. 119 and the I-287 service roads to serve the corporate office parks with a coveted, rider-attracting, efficient one seat ride.

The Tri-State Transportation Campaign web site:

www.tstc.org

Further, the proposed BRT system makes only marginally more east of Hudson stops than the proposed commuter rail system, and *fewer* stops than the Westchester light rail plan. Again, this plan fails to take advantage of **BRT's flexibility** – BRT infrastructure requirements and service versatility are so minimal that a station can be put nearly anywhere.

Metro-North and its partner agencies should not shortchange bus rapid transit to make commuter rail look more attractive. In planning terms, there is no reason Rockland-Westchester bus rapid transit cannot co-exist with Rockland-Manhattan commuter rail, which Metro-North has termed its “holy grail” for the project (*MTR #451*). The agencies should consider a viable east-west transit option very carefully, since Manhattan-destined commuter rail will do little to alleviate Tappan Zee Bridge congestion.

Preliminary ridership figures show commuter rail attracting significantly more commuters than the BRT option, though for Rockland-Westchester trips BRT significantly outperforms rail, even in the limited configuration currently proposed.

The Tri-State Campaign will insist the agencies consider a more worthwhile BRT option.

Public meetings on the alternatives will be held **Monday and Tuesday, December 12 and 13th** (see calendar for details). The agencies say they will complete the environmental review of the alternatives in two to three years. ❖

Staten Island: Transit Lane Bait & Switch?

The paint had not even dried on the new bus lanes along the eastern end of the Staten Island Expressway before politicians began to pressure the NY State DOT to open them to car traffic.

Bus lanes like the 1.9-mile S.I.E. route are subject to the so-called “empty lane syndrome,” where gridlocked drivers seethe next to lanes that move a bus every minute or so during rush hour. Opening such lanes to car traffic is of course essentially akin to paving over nearby rail tracks for the same purpose because the tracks are not constantly clogged with trains, but the political problem nonetheless exists. Staten Island politicians announced last week they had pressed NYS DOT to study allowing cars with 3 passengers in the lanes. Whether other options will also be studied is unclear. Borough President Molinaro said a public meeting will be held next month.

NYS DOT needs to stick to its guns against this political pressure. Opening the bus lanes to cars has many pitfalls. In an area as crowded with cars as Staten Island, additional traffic will rapidly fill any new space on the road — there will be four clogged lanes where there now are three. Even “HOV” strategies face this pitfall. Many cars with two or more passengers already use the expressway. If they

are moved over to the bus lanes, they not only impede buses, they also open up room in the general lanes for more trucks and solo motorists. If the standard is three or more per vehicle (“HOV-3”), it affects relatively few cars, enormously complicates enforcement of the bus lanes and could start the process toward “HOV-2” or general traffic use.

Further, a process by which a mass transit project is created but then turned into highway lanes begs questions of legality and **future trust in the DOT's intentions**, or at least in the consequences of any action the agency takes to build special-use lanes. The DOT recently took over the Tappan Zee corridor project, which envisions construction of “high occupancy toll” lanes in Rockland County, another highway innovation untested in the region or NY State. Everyone involved in that project, and in other projects involving special use lanes, will have to ask how quickly highway agencies will roll over to political pressure to change the nature of those lanes if the DOT caves in on the Staten Island lanes.

Other than Staten Island *Advance* editorialists, who have been wary about a stampede to open the lanes up, Assemblyman Vincent Ignizio seems so far to be the only local voice for proceeding with caution and remembering that bus riders are a constituency too. “It’s important to remember these lanes were to make sure that people get to and from work more efficiently,” Ignizio told the *Advance*. “We have to make sure we’re not cutting into that.”

The NYSDOT documentation for the Staten Island bus lane project does not address auto use of the new bus lanes. No environmental or traffic impact has been assessed for car use of the lanes. Generally, a full environmental impact statement is needed for a major highway expansion in NY State. It is unclear so far whether the study announced by the Staten Island elected officials will constitute a formal environmental impact statement for use of the lanes by automobiles. ❖

NYC Bus Innovation: Will Result be Rapid?

“Bus rapid transit” projects being contemplated by NYC Transit and the NYC DOT will apparently feature bus lanes running alongside parking lanes, with stops that bulb-out through parking lanes so that buses do not have to pull aside to make stops, according to a recent presentation by NYC Transit. The projects may also create colored bus lanes, involve some form of bus-priority signals or intersections and involve special branding of the buses using the routes.

It is so far unclear, however, **how much improvement** these projects will represent. How will the new bus lanes be better protected from encroachment than existing NYC bus lanes? Why can’t bus stops all over the city be extended into the

parking lanes?

The most thorough bus rapid transit projects **transform the boulevards or avenues** in question into true rapid transit lines that attract many passengers with exclusive lanes and stations that require passengers to pay fares before boarding. NYC's apparent determination not to seek any change in fare payment mode for its rapid bus plans and its reliance on pairs of one-way avenues mean this effect is likely to be very limited.

Part of the criteria for selecting avenues for the new treatments was low impact of the "BRT" project on general traffic flow. NYC will obviously have a hard time significantly improving bus service or launching true bus rapid transit corridors as long as the NYC DOT is unwilling to make basic trade-offs between world-class mass transit service and keeping cars happy.

We urge the agencies to think a little more ambitiously and consider some high-passenger areas for **pre-boarding fare collection**, and identify some specific bottlenecks on candidate avenues for separated lane treatments.

Currently, New York City bus speeds are appallingly slow. The annual Pokey Awards by the Straphangers Campaign and Transportation Alternatives again found the M34 the slowest route in the city, with average speeds of 3.4 miles per hour at noon. In the other boroughs, the B63, Bx19, Q58, S61 were slowest, with average speeds from 4.9 to 11.9 miles per hour. The Federal Transit Administration found that NYC had the slowest urban buses in the United States several years ago.

Most of the fifteen corridors being studied make sense for BRT, including areas in Queens far from subway service, Hylan Boulevard in Staten Island, and Flatbush and Flatlands Avenues in Brooklyn. Overall, six potential corridors are being studied in Queens, three in each the Bronx and Brooklyn, two in Manhattan and one in Staten Island. Five corridors will ultimately be selected for BRT implementation, with the final study done in 2007. Improvements for city buses cannot come too soon — we hope a second set of projects is identified and worked up as the first are implemented. ❖

Three Faces of MOM Have Long History

We recently reported (*MTR #513*) that legislators from Middlesex County supported the Lakehurst-Monmouth Junction alignment of the proposed Monmouth-Ocean-Middlesex rail line, and that Ocean and Monmouth officials support the Lakehurst-Matawan extension. But the opposite is true.

In 1996, when NJ Transit first looked extending rail from Monmouth and Ocean counties into Middlesex, officeholders across the area seemed thrilled and held press conferences advancing the project

(*MTR #273*). In initial studies, the now-preferred Lakehurst to Matawan alignment was cast aside by NJ Transit as not doable. At the time it was believed that 72 of the 75 municipalities that would be impacted by construction of the Lakehurst-Monmouth Junction route would support the project. However, NIMBY opposition has grown to include much of Middlesex County, transforming the project's political landscape.

The three Middlesex County communities through which the Matawan-Monmouth Junction alignment would pass, South Brunswick, Jamesburg and Monroe, have all passed resolutions against the project, citing fears of increased local traffic.

According to the *News-Transcript* of Farmingdale, State Senator Peter Inverso convinced NJ Transit to take a second look at the Lakehurst to Matawan alignment, which would keep the project out of Middlesex. When NJ Transit released its DEIS earlier this year, it picked this route as the preferred alternative. NJ Transit studies project that this alignment would produce the highest ridership. The project would not provide increased rail service to any part of Middlesex County.

No sooner had the NJ Transit report been released than it was attacked by elected officials in Monmouth and Ocean counties who support the extension to South Brunswick as the best way to move people by rail from their counties to New York City.

Ocean County released its own ridership estimates that showed the Lakehurst-Monmouth alignment would produce the most riders, and Assemblymen J. Panter and Robert Morgan charged that Transit bowed to pressure from Senator Inverso and boosted ridership estimates. Officials from both counties also note that the Lakehurst-Matawan extension parallels some North Jersey Coast Line service.

However, supporters of the Lakehurst-Matawan extension are quick to point out that extending the line to Monmouth Junction is the most expensive alignment. Assembly members Bill Baroni and Linda Greenstein both note its high cost. Estimates say it will cost \$860 million to build the Lakehurst-Monmouth alignment and \$49 million per year to operate, while the Matawan extension is \$730 million to build and \$45 million annually to run.

Regardless of the alignment finally selected, the operating plan today is for the MOM trains to stop in Newark where continuing passengers must connect to PATH or Northeast Corridor trains. A future expansion of NJ Transit cross-Hudson tunnel capacity could permit through trains to Manhattan and further connections at Secaucus, probably significantly hiking ridership. The completed EIS is expected sometime in 2006 but the start of construction of the project in budget-challenged New Jersey is right now anyone's guess. ❖

Sorry We Asked

Not long ago, we urged readers to suggest new names for the project to build an additional commuter rail tunnel between New Jersey and Manhattan. We hoped for a moniker more descriptive than the planner-ish ARC (Access to the Region's Core) and less off-putting and awkward than the typo-like THE (Trans-Hudson Express) Tunnel.

But initial responses didn't improve much on these, prompting reflection on the process by which pieces of transportation networks are named.

Interestingly, existing commuter rail tunnels in the region have either no or completely obscured names. On the other hand, all of the region's large car tunnels have names (the Holland being named for the chief engineer of the Hudson River Vehicular Tunnel project, who died on the job in 1927), most major bridges are named (even the all-rail Hell Gate Bridge) and even the East River subway tunnels tend to be named for streets they run under.

The responses also reflected tension between the functional names often attached during planning and construction and the final, often commemorative names assigned upon completion (note Holland Tunnel example above). Given that getting a big project done these days often requires a political and public sell-job lasting years, the ideal name would somehow both describe the project and lend some extra public appeal. The **Pulaski Skyway**, for instance, remembers a Revolutionary War general and finds an exciting description for the elevated road.

In eras of easier public works, New York often got away with the most banal geographic naming for many of its crossings — the Queens-Midtown Tunnel, for example. The city has done somewhat better with historical names, though not always without struggle. The Verrazano Narrows Bridge escaped a “Brooklyn-Staten Island” label thanks to a dogged decade-plus battle by the Italian Historical Society (which was nearly derailed by the 1963 assassination of President Kennedy).

Some of our better submissions for the commuter rail project are in the historical- or famous-figure category, though we admit they may do little to build the project's identity as it seeks the billions needed for construction: “Service will be great once the **Springsteen Tunnel** is built!” (Isn't Bruce driving aimlessly in a lot of songs? On the other hand he put out “Tunnel of Love”).

We also liked:

The Rosa Parks Transitway

The North River Railway (after an archaic name for the Hudson River).

The Half Moon Tunnel (after Hudson's ship). ❖

MTR#515

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CALENDAR

December 7, 6:30pm. NYC Economic Development Corp. public scoping hearing for proposed Plaza at the Hub, Bronx. Lincoln Hospital Auditorium, 234 East 149th Street, Bronx. 212-312-3703.

December 8, 8:30-10:00am. [Municipal Art Society](http://www.municipalartsociety.org) Planning Center Forum Series: "How Much Can Rezoning Accomplish as a Planning Tool" - Case Study: Staten Island." MAS, 457 Madison Avenue. RSVP to Maia Mordana at 212-935-3960 or planning@mas.org.

December 12, 4:00-8:00pm. Tappan Zee Bridge/I-287 Environmental Review Workshop. Presentations at 4:30pm and 6:30pm. NY Power Authority Jaguar Room, 123 Main Street, White Plains NY. 917-339-0488. www.tzbsite.com.

December 13, 4:00-8:00pm. Tappan Zee Bridge/I-287 Environmental Review Workshop. Presentations at 4:30pm and 6:30pm. Palisades Mall Adler Room, 1000 Palisades Center Drive, West Nyack, NY. 917-339-0488. www.tzbsite.com.

December 14, 9:30am. MTA Board Meeting. MTA Headquarters, 347 Madison Avenue, 5th Floor Board Room, Manhattan.

December 15, 1:15pm. NYMTC Program, Finance and Administration Committee meeting. Special guest Donald Shoup will discuss 'Pricing Parking in Business Districts.' NYMTC, 199 Water Street, 22nd Floor, Manhattan. 212-383-7200. www.nymtc.org.

December 16, 10am-12pm. NYU Rudin Center forum with Donald Shoup, UCLA professor, author of the *High Cost of Free Parking*. NYU Kimmel Center, 40 Washington Square South. Registration required. <http://www.utrc2.org> or email seminars@utrc2.org. 212-998-7545.

December 21, 12:00-2:00pm. NYC Transit Riders Council meeting. MTA Headquarters, 347 Madison Avenue, 5th Floor Board Room. 212-878-7087.

[More calendar items at www.tstc.org](http://www.tstc.org)

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