

# Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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## NEWS

### Another Hurdle to Growth

Housing is generally seen as a major constraint to Long Island's economy, but transportation is no picnic either. A recent Long Island business survey by *Long Island Business News* found that employers regarded the island's **weak public transit** system as a **deterrent** to attracting and retaining skilled employees. Recently, LIRR expansion projects have run into a buzz saw of NIMBY hostility at nearly every turn. In 2004, communities in the Huntington area shouted down a yard project that would have increased service on the Port Jefferson Line, while western Nassau County municipal leaders waged a hysterical campaign of disinformation against the Main Line third track project this year. Nassau's decent bus system is constrained from serving more riders by county government's inattention. County leaders have neither found the money to improve the system nor gone to bat for it in a worthwhile way in Albany or at MTA headquarters.



A *NY Times* survey last month noted the growth of LIRR-oriented housing development around Long Island, citing projects in Huntington Station, Patchogue, Freeport, Great Neck and Yaphank. Some of the projects have affordable units set-aside, while others are luxury oriented. An architect in Great Neck said conversion of downtown offices to condominiums is "becoming rampant," driven by affluent residents who value life in the town but want lower-maintenance living than a full-scale house demands. Developers are finding the projects worthwhile because they are increasingly receiving density increases from municipalities.

The piece noted that housing near LIRR is still generally best for the shrinking slice of Long Islanders that work in New York City, because jobs on Long Island are often not rail-accessible. The Yaphank project is considered "workforce housing." It mixes housing and shopping, but not commercial development that could create transit accessible jobs. ❖

### New Jersey Funding Fix: Wait Till Next Year

Governor-Elect Jon Corzine says he is keeping his options open regarding transportation funding. Corzine said last week a gas tax increase may be needed, going back on a campaign pledge made at a radio debate. Some news outlets were quick to declare a flip-flop, but have not backed alternative revenue streams themselves. Now that gas prices have dropped to an average of \$2.05 across NJ from well over \$3 in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Corzine may be calculating that the political climate can afford a gas tax increase.

Last week the NJ Assembly's Transportation Committee also took up transportation funding issues, voted in favor of legislation to cap transportation-related borrowing, increase local aid and contain state spending on road expansion. Most radically, the bill would **phase out the raiding of capital budgets** to meet NJ Transit and NJ DOT operations over five years, requiring the development of a new operating revenue source that would probably have to raise \$500 million or more annually once the full phase-out was effective.

The legislation, A.3414, passed on a strict party-line vote, with every Democrat in favor and every Republican abstaining. Peter Biondi, a Republican prime sponsor of the legislation, did not attend.

The committee action does not seem to have any immediate significance, but it points in the direction the state is likely to go in reforming the institutional context of transportation funding.

Legislative leaders have no plans to advance A.3414 or any other legislation related to transportation funding to the Assembly or Senate floors during December, making the dearth of transportation resources an **immediate priority** of the **incoming Corzine administration** in the next session. Indeed, State Senate Majority Leader Bernard Kenny has announced he will introduce legislation to raise the gas tax, presumably in January. So far, Senator Kenny appears not to have settled on a final figure for the hike. ❖

### Cost of LIRR East Side Plan Pushes Debate

Transit advocates are taking increased notice of an alternative to the MTA's preferred plan for joining the Long Island Rail Road to Grand Central Terminal. The new plan was commissioned by Midtown

The Tri-State Transportation Campaign web site:

[www.tstc.org](http://www.tstc.org)

real estate interests and other stakeholders originally concerned about specific features of the MTA's "deep cavern" plan, especially the 16 story ventilation tower containing a giant diesel fuel tank for back-up power generators slated for East 50<sup>th</sup> Street.

At least some of those concerns appear to have been addressed by the MTA, which recently announced that the facility would be scaled back, with ventilation moved to the tops of existing buildings and fuel tanks, generators and other features dispersed around the area.

But the plan commissioned by the Midtown groups, which hired the Delcan Corporation of Toronto, a venerable transportation and technology firm, also promises a less expensive overall project. It is gaining attention precisely because the costs for the MTA alternative are soaring.

MTA estimates for the deep cavern proposal have risen from \$4.3 billion to \$6.3 billion. Reportedly, federal officials are now putting the cost at \$7.3 billion. The steady upward climb may hurt other important projects in the context of a tight capital budget -- the Second Avenue Subway and the myriad state-of-good repair projects in the MTA's five-year capital plan need all the funding they can get, from every level of government.

The Delcan plan discards the MTA's "deep cavern" approach in favor of having LIRR trains use surplus track capacity in the existing levels of Grand Central Terminal. In this plan, the 63<sup>rd</sup> Street Tunnel under the East River would connect directly into Metro-North's Park Avenue tunnel in the 50s and use Grand Central tracks and platforms that connect to an existing loop track, allowing trains to clear the station after unloading and loading passengers. Delcan estimates that its plan would be at least \$1.2 billion cheaper, and far quicker to construct than the preferred alternative.

The deep cavern plan would excavate a new level 13 stories below Park Avenue, with LIRR trains serving eight tracks and four platforms there. The plan could accommodate 24 trains in the peak hour, while the Delcan plan would accommodate 21

LIRR trains along with Metro-North's operation (and perhaps more with modifications to stairways and concourses that connect to Grand Central platforms. The plan would permit construction of a LIRR concourse at an intermediate level, avoid difficult tunneling under Manhattan office buildings and would have only minor impact on Metro-North operations during construction.

The MTA's rejection of an earlier version of the Delcan plan -- put forward by the NYC Institute for Rational Mobility -- during the LIRR East Side Access EIS process seemed to hinge on capacity issues, including future Metro-North expansion and a disagreement of how many LIRR trains would be able to use the existing tracks and platforms. But IRUM pointed out that

Grand Central Terminal (GCT) is the largest passenger rail terminal in the world, by a wide margin. It has massive excess capacity and can be modified to accommodate the ESA project without seriously constraining Metro-North operations.

GCT was built in the early 20th century for use by trains from the Midwest and New England, but is now primarily used by commuter trains. There are 46 platform tracks used by 51 trains in the peak hour. Each platform is used, on average, by one train every 54 minutes. In contrast, Penn Station, as well as rail terminals in London and Paris, typically have one train every twelve to twenty minutes at each platform. Virtually all other commuter rail terminals have two or three times as many trains, per platform per hour, as GCT.

Transit advocates are also interested in safety considerations. While the Delcan proposal uses existing Grand Central facilities, the MTA alternative involves a 14-story escalator ride. The deep cavern would be difficult to evacuate in an emergency or power outage. The need for on-site back-up power for the plan was the driver of the big diesel tank on 50<sup>th</sup> Street that helped drive Midtown opposition to the project.

Reportedly, MTA officials have agreed to meet with Delcan representatives for a presentation of their alternative LIRR-Grand Central alternative.

Several reports and presentations on the issue are on-line at: [irum.org/lirr\\_esa.htm](http://irum.org/lirr_esa.htm) ❖

### CT Riding the Rails

ConnDOT reports a roughly 9 percent increase in intra-Connecticut trips on Metro-North's New Haven Line and CT's Shore Line East service in September and October, compared to the same months in 2004. Officials told reporters the growth was sustained through October, and apparently not just a "sticker shock" reaction to Labor Day's Hurricane Katrina gas price spike. They also credited a strong job market along the state's southwest coast. Ridership to NYC on the New Haven line is up about 2.5 % for the same months. ❖

### Hudson Traffic Off, No PA Hike for Now

Port Authority officials say vehicle trips at its bridges and tunnels are down in 2005, and point the finger at higher gas prices, according to the *Bergen Record*. They expect this suppression to continue -- the PA 2006 budget projects a 2.6% decline -- \$19 million less -- from 2005 vehicle toll receipts.

Last week, the agency adopted a \$5 billion 2006 budget that does not call for fare or toll hikes. How-

ever, officials told reporters an increase in the foreseeable future is not out of the question.

The budget includes \$1.8 billion for capital projects. Big construction or purchasing efforts include a new PATH train fleet (see *MTR #511*), a Jet Blue terminal at JFK Airport, and work at Newark Airport. The PA is also moving forward with the transit terminal at the World Trade Center site, a project funding mostly by the federal government.

The Port Authority will adopt a new 5-year plan next year. The *Record* reported that the PA may also include \$1.5 billion in a 10-year capital spending outlook it is preparing for rapid transit between NYC and Stewart Airport in Newburgh, which officials say may be needed as a “4<sup>th</sup> airport” for the metropolitan region. ❖

### **MTA Discounts – Ho Hum**

The holiday fare discounts offered by the MTA are not attracting much of a market — NYC news outlets report that only half of the bargain 40-day MetroCards on offer were sold as of early December. The discounts are available only from fare booths, and only by paying cash. Some advocates were interested in whether the discounts might attract enough riders to pay for themselves. But the fact that they were subject to special purchase conditions instead of through simple price cuts for normal fares has made the program a non-starter. ❖

### **Needed: Transportation Plan for Williamsburg**

A recent *NY Times* report on the G-train subway line spotlighted 10% growth in ridership since 2000 and the safety problem inherent in NYC Transit’s use of four-car trains on the line during rush hour (it causes riders caught at the wrong end of 12-car platforms to perform the “G-line” sprint).

NYC Transportation Commissioner Iris Weinshall recently refused to undertake a transportation capacity study of northern Brooklyn (*MTR #510*). The Tri-State Campaign requested such an effort because the area’s subways are at or over capacity now and the city’s recent rezoning of the area will cause even more growth and worse crowding on the G and L lines, as well as street congestion.

While those are NYC Transit operations, that agency tends to respond extremely slowly to changing conditions — the Bloomberg administration needs to take responsibility for the growth it seeks to create and become an advocate on behalf of New Yorkers for needed infrastructure improvements where they are controlled by non-city agencies. It’s not too early to begin crafting an agenda for the MTA’s 2009-2014 capital program, and in the absence of a Mayor’s Transportation Office, city government’s point of view should be represented by the city’s Transportation Commissioner. ❖

### **Two Truck Calming Plans Worth Replicating**

**Camden** As part of a smart growth study for the City of Camden, NJDOT undertook a look at what could be done to reduce truck traffic on River Road (County Road 543), which cuts directly through the Cramer Hill community. The constant presence of truck traffic stunted economic growth in an area in desperate for redevelopment.

Because River Road is a county route, government cannot regulate truck access to it. However, the parallel NJ Route 130 offers a readily available alternative. Even though Route 130 to get past the Cramer Hill area takes less time than River Road, too many truckers the latter because it is more direct. Most of the trucks using River Road come from industrial areas to the west and were making local deliveries in other parts of Camden.

Without the option of legal restrictions, the DOT has opted for arguable more effective information and **traffic calming strategies**.

DOT, city and county governments and local stakeholders have devised a four phase plan. Each piece will increase the intensity of a mix of traffic calming on Route 543, signage around the area and intersection improvements to ease truck access to Route 130 until the desired re-routing is reached.

In the end, all interested parties, including the trucking industry, were satisfied with the plan. Officials are about to launch phase 1. The DOT has expressed a willingness to work with New Jersey communities on truck traffic issues and credit their success to collaborative problem solving. DOT is now conducting look at a similar issue in Raritan.

**Staten Island** Last month, city and state DOT officials agreed to divert trucks during the clean-up of Staten Island’s Brookfield landfill so the communities of Greenridge and Great Kills are spared from added truck impacts.

Trucks are generally prohibited from using parkways in New York City, but allowing the landfill trucks to use the Korean War Veterans Parkway during the remediation project will keep over **100 trucks per day** from rumbling down residential streets. The plan makes use of two dormant overpasses which were built to connect the parkway and the Staten Island Expressway, though the project was never completed.

The politicians who championed this sensible plan — Congressman Vito Fossella, Assemblyman Vincent Ignizio, and Councilman Andrew Lanza — should consider working to make the change permanent, since truck traffic growth projections for Staten Island are the highest in the city — at least 62% more trucks by year 2020, according to the FHWA. ❖

Dear *Mobilizing the Region* Reader,

As a *Mobilizing the Region* reader, you know that for over a decade the Tri-State Transportation Campaign has worked to re-orient transportation spending in New Jersey away from simply widening congested highways. Today, New Jersey has forged a model policy in which transportation agencies promote vibrant town and city centers, seek to minimize congestion through smart siting for development and expand the reach of mass transit.

The transformation we are seeing in New Jersey is a striking example of the importance of long-term pressure and public discourse that changes the terms of the discussion.

That is the essence of *Mobilizing the Region* and the advocacy of the Tri-State Transportation Campaign - changing the region's transportation discussion from a strictly engineering focus to an inclusive planning perspective that considers and strengthens communities, economies and the environment. Nothing shapes our communities and our metropolitan region like transportation infrastructure, and we deserve nothing less than the most advanced planning tools and techniques available.

Today, I ask that you consider a tax-deductible [year-end gift to the Tri-State Transportation Campaign](#) to support our advocacy and continued publication of *MTR* during 2006. Policy development in New Jersey is indeed impressive, but there is much more to do to advance a sustainable transportation agenda in our region. We need to tell New Jersey's story to more people in New York and Connecticut.

Consider:

- While its global competitors forge ahead with congestion pricing, bus rapid transit, smart freight planning and traffic calming, New York City is doing nothing to reduce congestion or ease the quality of life impacts of heavy car and truck traffic.
- The New York State Dept. of Transportation clings to the mantra, "we don't do land use," even though sprawling development is fueling traffic growth around the state.
- The Connecticut DOT has reformed so little in the past decade that the chief source of bike and pedestrian projects in the state is earmarks by members of Congress.
- New Jersey's plans for modest expansion of its rail freight network are stuck in the mud.
- NY State agencies are developing road and transit projects in the Tappan Zee corridor that could shape the lower Hudson Valley for the next century, but have taken an all-engineering approach that has not engaged the affected municipalities.
- While the suburbs try to grapple with transit-oriented development, the Bloomberg administration is promoting drive-up malls and stadiums across The Bronx, Queens, Brooklyn and Staten Island.
- Rail expansion on Long Island is threatened by NIMBY demagogues at every turn.

The Tri-State Transportation Campaign has forged real change across the region, from congestion pricing at Port Authority tolls to New Jersey's "fix-it-first" policy, additional bus and pedestrian safety funding on Long Island and more.

This year alone, we helped defeat the West Side Stadium in Manhattan, a potential traffic nightmare, and won a decade long battle against a proposed 6.7 mile highway, Route 92, in Middlesex County, NJ.

We will see additional progress toward world-class transportation in the years ahead, as we continue to change the terms of the discussion. [The more you can help us](#), the faster we will win.

To donate, please go to [www.tstc.org/fundraising/donate.html](http://www.tstc.org/fundraising/donate.html), or send contributions to the address below.

Thank you,

Jon Orcutt, Executive Director

## CALENDAR

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

**January 25, 2006** 9:30am. MTA Board Meeting. MTA Headquarters, 347 Madison Avenue, 5th Floor Board Room, Manhattan.

**February 28**, 9:30am. MTA Board Meeting. MTA Headquarters, 347 Madison Avenue, 5th Floor Board Room, Manhattan.

**March 9**, 8:30-10:00am. [Municipal Art Society](#) Planning Center Forum Series: "Market Forces and Community Vision: The Role of Community in 'As-of-Right' Development - Case Study: Flushing." MAS, 457 Madison Avenue. RSVP to Maia Mordana at 212-935-3960 or [planning@mas.org](mailto:planning@mas.org).

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