

Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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NEWS

Kolluri Announced, Faces Tough Road

Kris Kolluri has finally been named by Governor Corzine as New Jersey's transportation commissioner (*MTR #518*). Kolluri is likely to be confirmed by the state senate in the next week or so.

As commissioner, one of Kolluri's prominent jobs in the new administration's first year will be to sell a package of revenue measures to **re-finance the state's transportation trust fund**, which will run dry in July at the start of the state fiscal year if no legislative action is taken to secure new funding.

That will be a big job. Three separate public opinion polls taken in January showed deep resistance to raising New Jersey's gas tax; even when the question is framed in terms of the money raised being applied directly to fix dilapidated roads and bridges.

All three polls, by Quinnipiac and Farleigh-Dickinson Universities, and *The Bergen Record*, showed super-majorities against raising taxes to fund transportation. Two of them also showed that news of the state's impending transportation bankruptcy hasn't generated a significant buzz among the general citizenry of the state.

The Farleigh Dickinson poll showed that half of respondents felt they had heard "little or nothing" about the issue; yet nearly three-quarters of those interviewed (74%) were against raising the tax at all. The Quinnipiac results said that sentiment against raising gas taxes has increased over the past year, presumably owing to gasoline price increases and intensive media coverage of them. In January 2005 those polled rejected a gas tax increase by a 39-57 margin, but respective shares of support and opposition had changed to 27-69 by January 2006.

Kolluri will also have to prioritize among projects, both in case a funding solution creates new spending limits and because costs of transportation projects in NJ appear to be rising. The North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority reports that bids for construction projects are coming in "substantially greater" than initial agency cost estimates because of rising costs of steel, concrete and construction-related fuel. Because the federal government has already allocated funds to specific projects already, the state may have to come up with new estimates for state funding shares projects or risk shortfalls within project budgets. ❖

Economy Holding the Line on MTA Fares ?

MTA Executive Director Kathryn Lapp told NY State legislators last week the downstate transit system's finances may be in good enough shape to **stave off a general fare increase** planned for 2007, according to news reports.

The NY State budget passed last spring included an increase in a tax on filing mortgage transactions, with proceeds dedicated to the MTA capital program. Continuation of the region's housing and real estate boom has led to higher than expected revenues from that and other taxes. Additional capital funds likely mean the agency is having to borrow less, or is paying debt off more quickly than planned, which provides operating budget savings. The MTA may also have had somewhat lower than expected expenses during 2005.

The additional tax revenue appears to be reflected in the state budget recently presented by Governor Pataki, who announced big increases in transit operating funds. Because of the history of elected officials moving in to transfer mass transit budget surpluses to other areas of spending, transit advocates and officials would be wise to continue to link the current build up of funds to clear goals like eliminating a fare increase. ❖

Windfall for NY's Suburban Buses ?

Governor Pataki's recent budget speech announced big increases in state aid to mass transit operating budgets. One set of beneficiaries of the funding hike is downstate suburban bus operators, especially in Westchester and Nassau Counties.

Westchester's sometimes-troubled Bee-Line bus system receives the biggest boost. Complaints by Westchester lawmakers and newspapers about Bee-Line's state aid levels relative to those seen at Nassau's Long Island Bus appear to have paid off. If proposed levels are enacted, Bee-Line will see a **50% rise** in state operating assistance, from \$28 million to over \$42 million.

Not that Long Island Bus does badly. Its state aid is slated to increase from about \$36 million to over \$44 million. Hopefully, much of that can go to service increases. Long Island Bus **sets ridership records year after year**, and is now heavily strained by crowding on some routes and too-infrequent ser-

vice on many others.

One potential problem is whether the new funding levels will be sustained beyond Governor Pataki's final budget. Can operators add service if they may face cutbacks next year? Transit assistance from Albany was once made on a multi-year basis, which provided for more orderly service planning.

Westchester's Bee-Line may at any rate be poised to deliver a permanent bump-up in riders. The *Journal-News* reported that the agency will add MetroCard capability by the end of the year, allowing riders free transfers to Bronx subways. Negotiations are underway between the two agencies.

Long Island Bus' implementation of free transfers to subways in Queens in the 1990s helped set the system on a growth path that has yet to relent.

Westchester should have higher bus ridership even without free transfers. Census data shows that the county has about 50% more car-less households than does Nassau, yet bus ridership in the two counties is roughly comparable at around 110,000 per day. Westchester can begin to remedy that with the introduction of MetroCard transfers and, hopefully, some significant accompanying improvements in service. ❖

In CT, New Life for Some Old Ideas

Governor Jodi Rell has proposed a new \$600 million transportation plan focused on two ideas that have been discussed for some time: a Hartford to New Britain bus-way and a commuter rail line from Springfield, MA to New Haven.

Last year, Rell passed a \$1.3 billion transportation plan to pay for hundreds of new commuter rail cars and other rail improvements. This is a second phase of her plan and will take ten years to implement.

Amtrak runs trains from New Haven to Springfield, but the new line will be a commuter service with more trains and stations. The bus-way has been under development at ConnDOT for years, but it failed to receive federal funding partly because the state was not showing much dedication. The bus-way will have 12 stops.

Democrats called the plan a step in the right direction, but said more money is needed to make a dent in horrendous transportation conditions across the state. The plan will be paid for with an increase to 6.3% in the petroleum gross sales tax.

The transit projects are good news. But tackling state-wide gridlock will also **require a change in ConnDOT** instinct to throw big dollars at fruitless highway expansion projects. The New Jersey DOT, for example, has turned its back on projects that underwrite traffic-causing sprawl development. Like New Jersey, CT can use its transportation budget to help revitalize its cities and towns. ❖

NY State's Big Plans

The NY State Dept. of Transportation is seeking comments on a new draft of a state transportation plan that looks out to 2030. While it is debatable whether such documents ever provide much real-world guidance on actual project choice and development, this one could be interesting because it is suppose to arise from a set of state-wide hearings and recommendations embodied in the "Trouble Ahead" report held and crafted by a panel put together in 2004 by then-state transportation commissioner Joseph Boardman (see MTR #'s 484 and 503). The report urged that NY State:

- **Adopt a "fix it first" policy** to "protect its transportation assets."
- Make freight a central concern of the NY State DOT because truck traffic volumes are "exploding."
- Consider congestion pricing toll policies to manage congestion and to raise needed revenue.
- Have state transportation officials assume a stronger role in working with communities, governments and developers on **land use decisions** that may have big transportation consequences.

We have not read the draft plan yet to see how it addresses these issues, but will report on it shortly. It is on-line at www.dot.state.ny.us/tranplan/index.html. Commissioner Thomas Madison has requested comments on the draft by Feb. 24, 2006.

New Jersey is also in the process of updating its overall plan to 2030. www.state.nj.us/transportation/works/njchoices/ ❖

Living with Tappan Zee Transit: Parking

Debate over parking in Suffern and Pearl River, in Rockland County, provide some insight into work ahead for planners hoping to bring mass transit to the Tappan Zee corridor.

The NYS DOT, Metro-North, and Thruway Authority are considering transit options for the corridor, including commuter rail and bus rapid transit. Preliminary plans show a number of stations along the corridor, but so far, state planners have not talked to municipalities about siting them or building parking lots. But parking is already a controversial issue for these villages, and the location and size of new lots could drastically affect village support for any of the alternatives to build a Tappan Zee transit line.

In Suffern, plans for two new lots of 40-50 spaces were thrown out last week after local protest about traffic and cost. They would have hosted commuters

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and shoppers, and cost Suffern \$650,000. A *Journal-News* editorial urged that noted that NJ Transit and the MTA, not local governments, should pay for commuter parking. But that point missed the problem that parking itself is controversial because of the traffic it will generate. To win acceptance, additional parking will likely have to be well designed and made to fit into community contexts rather than assembled en masse around new or expanded transit stations. Even a modest plan to implement angle-parking to calm traffic and new meters to increase retail turnover along a main street in nearby Pearl River has not been without debate, though that worthy project is proceeding. ❖

Transit Ridership Up Around the Region

2005 was a good year for transit riding in the region, with all major agencies reporting increases. All ridership numbers in the table below are for the full calendar year unless otherwise noted.

Metro-North officials attributed the increase to the Bee-Line bus strike, high fuel costs and travel to see "The Gates" in Central Park.

National trends also look positive. The American Public Transit Association reported that U.S. transit riding averaged a 3.3% rise in the third quarter of 2005, compared to the same period in 2004.

Also in the third quarter, the Federal Highway Administration reported a decrease in vehicles miles traveled by .2% in 2005, compared to the same period in 2004.

	Ridership 05 (timeframe)	Ridership 04 (timeframe)	% increase
NYC Subway	1,338.61 mill. (Jan.- Nov.)	1,301.48 mill. (Jan.-Nov)	2.8
NYC Bus	682.28 mill. (Jan.-Nov)	679.42 mill. (Jan.-Nov)	.4
Long Island Rail Road	73.2 mill. (Jan.-Nov.)	72.4 mill. (Jan.-Nov.)	1.1
Long Island Bus	28.93 mill. (Jan.-Nov)	28 mill. (Jan.-Nov)	3.3
Metro-North RR—NY	72.8 mill.	70.2 mill.	3.7
CT New Haven Line	33.8 mill.	32.8 mill.	3.0
CT- Shore Line East	423,470	405,436	4.2
NJTransit Commuter Rail	67.0 mill (estimate)	63.6	5.3
NJ Transit Light Rail	14.4 mill. (estimate)	12.2 mill.	18
NJ Transit Bus	155.0 mill. (estimate)	150.6 mill.	2.9

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CALENDAR

February 6, 6-8pm. Seminar: Adam Millard-Ball, national expert on parking and car sharing. Center for Architecture, 536 LaGuardia Place, Manhattan. Seating limited; RSVP to 212-683-0023.

February 7, 7-10pm. Municipal Art Society opening gala: "Livable Streets: A New Vision for NYC." Multimedia presentations by The Open Planning Project, Transportation Alternatives, and Project for Public Spaces, launching the NYC Streets Renaissance Campaign. Urban Center, 457 Madison Avenue, Manhattan. RSVP to 212-935-2075 or rsvp@mas.org.

February 9, 12:15-2:00pm. [Long Island Rail Road Commuter's Council](#) meeting. MTA Headquarters, 347 Madison Avenue, 5th Floor Board Room, Manhattan. 212-878-7087.

February 14, 10am. NYC Council Transportation Committee oversight hearing: "Trucks, trucks, everywhere: Does the City make any effort to manage truck traffic?" 250 Broadway, 14th Floor, Manhattan. 212-788-7210.

February 15, 6:30-8pm. Municipal Art Society presents "Neighborhoods and Traffic" with guest speaker Karla Quintero, Project Coordinator, Transportation Alternatives. Urban Center, 457 Madison Avenue, Manhattan. RSVP to 212-935-2075 or rsvp@mas.org.

February 16, 8am. Women's Transportation Seminar present "The Port of New York & New Jersey: Preparing for the Future" with featured speaker Peter Zantal. PANYNJ. Newark Club, One Newark Center, Newark NJ. RSVP required: 212-973-2923 or rsvp@wtsqny.org.

February 16, 1pm. CT State Traffic Commission monthly meeting. ConnDOT Headquarters, Conference Rm. B., 2800 Berlin Twp, Newington, CT. 860-594-3020.

More calendar items at www.tstc.org

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