

Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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NEWS

Spitzer, Straphangers Oppose City Offer for MTA Manhattan Rail Yard

New York's gubernatorial front-runner Elliot Spitzer was quick to criticize the recent proposal by Mayor Bloomberg and NYC Council Speaker Christine Quinn to purchase the MTA's Hudson Yards for \$500 million.

The MTA is counting on \$1 billion in asset sales in its 2004-2009 capital program. Spitzer told the *NY Times* the city's offer is "**grossly under market value,**" and said the city's call for closure of the deal by the end of July too rushed. He called for a sale process that allows for transparent public bidding. Spitzer is likely to face Republican candidate John Faso in the race for governor this fall. Faso supports the Bloomberg plan to buy the yards, according to the *NY Sun*.

The city's offer is \$300 million for the western portion (west of 11th Avenue) of the yards and \$200 million for development rights from the eastern part. The city would also apparently agree to pay for a \$350-\$400 million platform needed to site buildings over the yard.

A statement from the Straphangers Campaign said, "We think the yards are worth far more money and we urge the MTA to be a hard bargainer. We would note that the **MTA's own appraiser valued the Western Yards alone at \$929 million.**"

The Straphangers warned that a shortfall in the MTA capital program's "asset sales" budget line could mean hundreds of millions of dollars less for new subway cars, buses, commuter rail trains, station rehabilitations, and infrastructure such as track and signals.

They urged the MTA not to act on the proposal at its July meeting. It is so far unclear whether the MTA is preparing a response to the city.

Editorial reaction so far has not been favorable to the city. The conservative *Post* and *Sun* both urged sale to private developers and questioned what city government would attempt to site over the yards. Deputy Mayor Daniel Doctoroff said the city would launch a study of site uses if its bid is accepted by the MTA. The *Sun* said part of the haste is to gain advantageous terms on **bonds for the #7 project**, whose bonds are to be paid off with revenue from future west side development. ❖

Connecticut Candidates on Transportation

Democratic governor hopeful and New Haven Mayor **John DeStefano** came out swinging on transportation policy last week, calling ConnDOT "An unwieldy, pavement-oriented behemoth."

DeStefano's policy statement goes on to call the agency "a bureaucracy **best suited to the highway-building days of the 1950s.** Innovation is frowned upon and the rule of thumb tends to be: When in doubt, overbuild." The solution, he says, is to create a separate agency for mass transit and another for ports, along with a bi-state Connecticut-Massachusetts body to run Bradley Airport.

Unfortunately, though he assails ConnDOT for its roads building focus, **DeStefano still calls for the hefty list of road expansion projects** backed by the state's Transportation Strategy Board and business groups. They include widening I-95 from Branford to the Rhode Island border; extending Rt. 11 from Salem to I-95; widening I-84 from Waterbury to Danbury; extending Rt. 7 in the Norwalk area; and finishing Rt. 6 from Bolton Notch to Windham. Together, these projects would cost billions, and do little to address the main cause of congestion—sprawling development. His plan doesn't mention anything about overall reform of DOT's practices and principles to slow sprawl, such as importing New Jersey's model of joint state-municipal planning to connect development plans with transportation investments, though he does say he will work to revise the property tax system to promote smart growth in areas with existing infrastructure.

The transit section of his plan touts well-known projects, such as a new commuter line between New Haven and Springfield and construction of a Hartford-New Britain busway. The latter has been talked about for years, but has not been finished due to lack of funds and leadership. DeStefano also wants to buy new rail cars for Metro-North and increase station parking. He says Connecticut should move more freight by rail and will work with New York leaders to establish rail freight connection across the New York Harbor.

DeStefano's Democratic primary opponent, Stamford mayor **Dannel Malloy**, doesn't have such a thorough and extensive list of transportation projects and plans, but he does target sprawling land

uses as a key problem in the state, and smart growth and **transit-oriented development** as a key solution. “When I am Governor, I will prioritize spending of state funds for projects that support Transit Oriented Development (TOD) and other Smart Growth solutions, in order to give local community leaders incentives and tools to make these projects a reality so that we can achieve the goals of less sprawl and preserve our natural resources while creating more housing and less congestion,” says his website.

Incumbent Governor Jodi Rell has made transportation a big issue in her tenure. Last year, she successfully passed into law her \$1.3 billion package for transit and roads, including \$667 million for 342 new Metro-North rail cars, and has promised new CT Transit buses. This year she worked with the legislature to **pass a \$2.3 billion initiative**, including funding for the commuter rail from New Haven to Springfield, along with money to study the I-95 widening from Branford to Rhode Island. However, commentators such as the Hartford *Courant* has said that she has failed to address the root cause of congestion in the state—poor land use decisions that spread development farther into rural areas and further erode cities. Transit advocates recently questioned why 33 Virginia rail cars the state bought in 2004 are taking so long to enter service. For more on the CT candidates: www.danmalloy.com, www.destefanoforct.com/

Sky Didn't Fall

As Trenton was convulsing around completion of New Jersey's state budget, Connecticut raised its petroleum gross receipt tax to fund a \$1.3 billion package of transportation projects (*MTR* #495). Fuel industry companies attempted to generate angry news coverage but managed only a ripple.

The .05 percent tax increase is expected to hike gas prices two to five cents at the pump. The percentage-based tax will gather more revenue when prices are higher. **Connecticut cut its gas tax in the 1990s** and let some of its transportation system fall into disrepair. Governor Rell and legislative leaders have felt recently that public and business anger over worsening travel conditions made weathering any anti-tax politics worthwhile

Many states, including New York, have recently passed voter-backed measures to raise new revenue for transportation investments. **NY State also raised its mortgage recording tax** downstate last year to help finance mass transit capital projects.

New Jersey, in contrast, still seems mired in 1993's anti-tax race for governor, and despite having one of the **lowest state gas taxes** in the U.S., recently borrowed to the hilt to pay for the next five years of transportation projects (*MTR* #525). ❖

Traffic Plan's Giant Flaws

Local mayors and officials in the Meadowlands Chamber of Commerce joined the Tri-State Transportation Campaign in urging the NJDEP and Meadowlands Commission to require a complete transportation plan for the new football stadium for the Giants and Jets. The organizations cited the **poor traffic study for the nearby Xanadu megamall** and broken promises by the Sports and Exposition Authority as reasons to be skeptical of the state's desire to hold the teams responsible.

The critics aired their concerns at a hearing on the scoping document on the upcoming environmental impact statement required for the stadium. While the scoping document suggests minimal impacts, **Mayor Dennis Elwell of Secaucus** blasted the narrow range of the proposed traffic study and called for a transportation study that examines what impact all of the development in the Sports Complex — including Xanadu — will have on the surrounding towns, not just the select few roads identified in the document.

Other shortcomings of the scoping document include **no figures on how many parking spaces** will be created for the stadium, no ridership numbers for the NJ Transit rail link to the complex; and language that implies that the traffic study will not include traffic generated by Xanadu.

Elwell's call for a better transit study is nothing new. Last year, four Bergen County municipalities and the Hudson County Board of Chosen Freeholders all called for a complete study of the transportation challenges and opportunities presented by the development in the Sports Complex. ❖

New York City: Traffic? Laws? What?

A hands-on survey of traffic law enforcement by staffers of Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer found that the Bloomberg administration does not enforce rules designed to prevent traffic from grinding to a halt at backed-up intersections.

The surveyors witnessed the action for 9 hours at 10 key Manhattan intersections and did not see a single **“blocking the box”** ticket issued. They counted over 3,000 cars blocking the box, however. City traffic officers or police were present at the observed intersections. The police lamely responded that they were more productive directing traffic than teaching motorists that there are consequences for illegal behavior at the wheel.



A similar undertaking by the Staten Island *Advance* found that more drivers than ever are **illegally blabbing on hand-held phones** while driving around the traffic-clogged borough. *Advance* reporters have twice surveyed the junction of Victory Boulevard

and Clove Road and say they counted 52% more cell-talking drivers than in April (32 “blatant” cases in 25 minutes). A chattering lead-foot recently smacked into a utility pole at the intersection, knocking out electricity to the area and jamming both streets. The NYPD cited statistics indicating that more summonses (1,982) for cell phone drivers were issued on Staten Island in the first quarter of 2006 than in the same period last year. ❖

Albany Scorecard

New York City will need police at fewer intersections thanks to the passage of legislation at the close of Albany’s 2006 session to **double the number of red light enforcement cameras** allowed in the city to 100. The state Assembly had unconscionably stymied the increase for years and still holds the technology on a tight leash even as other surveillance cameras multiply exponentially around the city. The increase is welcome but will have only a modest impact amid NYC’s many thousands of street intersections.

In *MTR* #532, we spotlighted four New York State bills that we wanted to pass before summer vacation. Among the other three, the legislature approved changes to the Public Authorities law that will remove obstacles claimed by NYC Transit regarding the establishment of a **bus route linking Staten Island** to the light rail terminal in **Bayonne, NJ**. Like red light camera expansion, this idea has been around for years, but mounting anger over gridlocked S.I. finally put this one over the line.

Two other good ideas have apparently not spent the requisite decade in Albany’s netherworld. A6450 would have allowed towns to create **“community preservation funds”** to protect natural areas, support family farms, and preserve historic buildings with local real-estate transfer taxes. The legislation has passed the Assembly before but the State Senate leadership apparently opposes the measure. It died in the Senate last year, and this year the Senate sought more input from local governments, stalling it once again. It still does not have a Senate companion bill.

A joint bill (A2230/S6718) would extend the federal mass **transit commute tax benefit** to state employees. CT and NJ state workers, City of New York and several New York county public workforces already enjoy this benefit. According to the state’s website, it didn’t make it out committees in either the Senate or Assembly, even though the Assembly passed it in 2004. ❖

www.tstc.org

The Tri-State Transportation Campaign web-site is redesigned! Please visit the new site and view new features, such as a commuter zone page that offers handy information for regional travel and a new easy-to-use *MTR* archive. Sign up to get e-mail notices of advocacy opportunities on our advocacy page. www.tstc.org/advocacy.html

City Planners Fail Brooklyn

A planner’s job is “not only to describe current behavior but also to anticipate behavioral change and its consequences,” according to the well-known textbook, *The Practice of Local Government Planning*. In NYC, on the other hand, the transportation establishment seems to wait for problems to hit it in the face before responding.

Booming development in northern Brooklyn has been causing subway use to surge for years, especially on the L-train. NYC Transit finally admitted to the *Daily News* last week that **the L fleet “is now not large enough.”** NYC Transit reported that L ridership growth was up 16% between 2000 and 2005. Growth is even more pronounced at certain stations, like the Bedford Ave, for example, where ridership shot up 140% from 1995 to 2005.

The NYC Transit says it is now looking at new options for the line, like upgrading older cars to expand the fleet, though “several months” would be needed to get them running. The agency recently installed Communications Based Train Control (CBTC) that allows trains to run closer together and purchased all-new trains for the line in the previous MTA capital program.

Transit advocates and elected officials have asked the city for over a year how the overcrowded transit system is going to accommodate thousands of new residents the recent Greenpoint-Williamsburg rezoning is going to attract, yet the **city refuses to undertake a long-range transportation plan** for the area.

Across Brooklyn, the *Daily News* reported today that 45-year-old Janett Ramos died from injuries caused by a driver who struck her while leaving the new Red Hook Fairway 8 days ago. Transportation reformers and community members have long worried about the traffic implications of the **suburban-style big boxes** the city has sited in the neighborhood, and asked it to impose more urban-oriented features on the projects. The city instead voted for giant parking lots and left most streets devoid of better conditions for pedestrians.

When Red Hook civic leaders asked NYCDOT if it would install a signal at the Fairway intersection, the agency said traffic levels did not warrant a light according to federal guidelines. Yet NYC DOT has no legal or other requirement to follow these guide-

The Tri-State Transportation Campaign web site:

www.tstc.org

lines. The *News* also reported that the death will not speed up a planned traffic study for the neighborhood, set to start in the fall.

City communities deserve better. Last time we checked, "Let's wait for problems to develop," was not an accepted theory of transportation planning, where fixes can take years to implement. ❖

Transit Agency as Developer

NJ Transit is working on plans for land it controls around the 65-acre Hoboken Terminal. Transit knows the site is ideal for significant development, and sees revenue from a large-scale deal as a way to help **underwrite transit system needs** in the future.

Hoboken has concerns that its zoning powers do not apply to land owned by Transit, but the agency is attempting to win a consensus by including city officials in the process early on, according to the *Jersey Journal*. It's unknown for now if the city could gain a stake in tax proceeds from a big project at the terminal. Hoboken is home to strong constituencies opposed to giant developments. ❖

We'd Like to Thank our Parents...

The Tri-State Transportation Campaign recently won a Smart Growth award from **Vision Long Island** for its overall work to promote transportation choice in Nassau and Suffolk Counties. Vision Long Island is the main smart growth group on the Island and presents the awards at an annual summit.

They cited the Campaign's work to improve commutes for Long Island bus riders, for spearheading a coalition in support of the LIRR Third Track, and for work to encourage the NY State Dept. of Transportation to incorporate land use planning into its transportation projects. They said the Campaign is "an organization that commands a rare voice of reason and technical expertise" and is "full of knowledge and hard-hitting advocacy." We thank our friends at Vision Long Island for the honor!

In May, the Newark-based **Regional Business Partnership** presented a leadership award to the Tri-State Campaign, Regional Plan Association, Voorhees Center at Rutgers University, and the AAA New Jersey chapter for the groups' joint public education, advocacy and lobbying campaign to win new revenue the reauthorization of New Jersey transportation trust fund.

It was in part a "valiant effort" award, since the state resorted to a giant borrowing scheme rather than new revenue, and the problem remains unsolved. But the groups are determined to build on its work to develop broader pressure on state decision makers next time around. ❖

CALENDAR

July 13, 12:15-2pm. Long Island Rail Road Commuters Council meeting. MTA Headquarters, 347 Madison Avenue, 10th Floor, Manhattan. 212-878-7087.

July 20, 4:30-6:30pm. Metro-North Railroad Commuter Council meeting. MTA Headquarters, 347 Madison Avenue, 10th Floor, Manhattan. 212-878-7087.

July 25, 7-9pm. I-78 Corridor Transit Study Public Meeting. Raritan Valley Community College, Route 28 and Lamington Rd (I-78 Exit 26), North Branch Twp. 973-639-8400, www.njtpa.org.

July 26, 9 a.m. MTA board meeting. Possible discussion of NYC proposal to purchase West Side rail yards. 347 Madison Avenue, 5th floor. Manhattan. 1-212-878-7440.

July 27, 12-2pm. New York City Transit Riders Council meeting. Bus Rapid Transit in NYC. MTA Headquarters, 347 Madison Avenue, 5th Floor, Manhattan. 212-878-7087.

July 27, 7-9pm. I-78 Corridor Transit Study Public Meeting. Warren County Technical School, 1500 Route 57 (I-78 Exit 17). 973-639-8400, www.njtpa.org.

August 10, 12:15-2:00pm. LIRR Commuters Council meeting. MTA Headquarters, 347 Madison Avenue, 10th Floor, Manhattan. 212-878-7087.

August 17, 4:30-6:30pm. Metro-North Railroad Commuter Council meeting. MTA Headquarters, 347 Madison Avenue, 10th Floor, Manhattan. 212-878-7087.

August 24, 12:00-2:00pm. New York City Transit Riders Council meeting. MTA Headquarters, 347 Madison Avenue, 5th Floor, Manhattan. 212-878-7087.

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

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



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