

# Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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## NEWS

### NY Transit Funding Fix in Spitzer's Court

In late September, MTA chairman Peter Kalikow said the MTA board would oppose a planned city **transit fare hike** and bus and subway **service cuts**. In its medium-range budget planning, the MTA had indicated that 2007 would see a 5% hike in fares along with service cuts totaling \$20 million, \$5 million in subways and \$15 million in buses.

Kalikow said the MTA has higher than anticipated revenue from real estate taxes, and that a period of high gas prices and increasing transit ridership was an inappropriate time for such measures. "Service cuts are something we do not like. We abhor them. We think they're wrong," he told the *NY Times*.

Kalikow's actions are welcome news for transit riders, but they may have been as much resistance to doing the dirty work for a new state leadership as anything else. Elliot Spitzer is poised to become governor of NY State in January, and has vowed to replace Kalikow as MTA leader.

"Doing a fare hike in December helps take the new governor off the hook," the Straphangers Campaign's Gene Russianoff told the *Times*. Russianoff noted the ballooning deficits facing the MTA after 2007 as a key challenge for NY State: "**All the big issues are now squarely in the lap of the new governor:** fare hike, service cuts, more state aid, MTA efficiencies...If they have enough money to make it through 2007 and really big deficits in '08 and '09, the whole menu of options should be there as a whole and enacted as a package."

The proposed cuts would have increased wait times on 65% of bus lines and ten of 23 NYC subway lines. Off peak subway service (all times but 6am-9am and 4pm-7pm) would have run every ten minutes. Riders and editorial boards applauded Chairman Kalikow's announcement.

However, likely problems after 2007 loom large. A recent report by state comptroller Alan Hevesi noted that debt payments for previously borrowed money will reach \$2.1 billion by 2012, with a **\$905 million deficit in 2008**. That could mean even more service cuts and higher fares if Albany does not apply new revenue to the problem. So far, gubernatorial front-runner Elliot Spitzer has not announced how he might respond to New York's long-range mass transit financial crisis. ❖

### Weinshall Points to the Future

In a speech that seemed a significant departure for New York City's transportation department under the Bloomberg administration, city transportation commissioner Iris Weinshall laid out an array of measures to improve New York's pedestrian and bicycling environments, soften the quality of life impacts of heavy traffic and begin to reclaim the sheer urban acreage given over to automobiles. Commissioner Weinshall made her remarks at the opening of a large-scale transportation conference convened today at Columbia University by **Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer**.

Both in terms of language used, which seemed to indicate that city government had moved closer to a goal of reducing car use, and the packaging together of a broad set of policy reform steps, the commissioner's speech may signal that the problem of planning for a future city of 9 million people is starting to concretely impact city policy.

The commissioner said NYC DOT would:

- Soon announce 5 bus rapid transit corridors, with **accelerated construction** (starting in fall 2007) on two of them. She also said NYC's BRT system could become the world's "most extensive."
- Implement its recently announced initiative to build 240 new miles of bicycle ways (*MTR #540*).
- Implement policies from its **truck route study** (*MTR #532*) including nighttime restrictions in neighborhoods and work with local NYPD precincts on wayward truck problems, though the commissioner offered no time frame here.
- Expand muni-meter curbside parking pricing — designed to mobilize turnover in parking spaces — south in Midtown from 33rd to 23rd Street.
- Begin a Lower Manhattan study looking in detail at optimal use of curb space. It is not clear if this initiative has potential to recommend elimination of privileged parking by government workers or the elimination of curbside parking in some areas for bus and bike lanes, or wider sidewalks.
- Begin capital work stemming from Safe Routes to Schools studies — Weinshall anticipated the installation of **750 neckdowns and 70 medians**, among other streetscape features, in a first round of work among other features.

- Expand a program to “boldly reimagine” city streetscapes and pursue “**aggressive pedestrianization**” building from the Willoughby Street reclamation in Brooklyn (MTR #525) and similar projects planned for Astor Place, 1st Avenue along Stuyvesant Town and other locations, to proliferate “neighborhood plazas” around the five boroughs.

- In major pedestrian areas like Herald and Times Squares, build out permanent sidewalk infrastructure to curb lines now marked by paint and temporary bollards, and change the Times Square traffic pattern to reclaim even more walking space.

- Set up a new **office of strategic planning** to develop long range ideas in these regards, to be run by Steve Weber, who has handled DOT’s post-9/11 lower Manhattan planning and worked at the Regional Plan Association on transit issues.

Although it is impossible to know the extent and pace of implementation these steps will enjoy, their articulation by the head of an agency that has largely acted as an apologist for cars’ domination of city streets for most of Mayor Bloomberg’s terms office is a welcome development.

#### **Stringer: “Transportation Crisis”**

Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer, in kicking off his conference, said that New York cannot take economic growth for granted, and that the challenge for a city projected to grow to 9 million in just a few decades is ensuring that traffic and transit congestion does not become a repellent to companies and people. Stringer invoked the **experience of London with congestion pricing** and of Copenhagen in turning space for cars into space for bicycling, and said that these experiences had to be part of the discussion here. He said the debate had to be city-wide, mentioning the impact of mega-development at already-clogged Flatbush and Atlantic Avenues in Brooklyn, the dangers of Queens Boulevard and creeping buses in the Bronx.

Former mayor of Bogota, Columbia **Enrique Penãlosa** was the conference’s keynote. He artfully connected Bogota’s experiences with bus rapid transit and cycling and pedestrian infrastructure with the potentials in New York, while acknowledging the cities’ differences. “Today, we aren’t just talking about transportation. What we are really talking about is: What kind of city do we want? There has to be a collective decision about how do we want to organize our lives. NYC, a long time ago, explicitly or implicitly decided that much of the city’s space would be dedicated to cars. This was a decision. It’s not some sort of natural law. Tomorrow we can change this. This is something that we have to decide. Transportation is not a technical matter. It is a political matter,” said Penãlosa. ❖

#### **Sign of the Times**

In a recent mailing to constituents, **State Assemblymember Joseph Lentol** noted that “transportation angst” was a big issue in his northern Brooklyn district. Lentol said he is “becoming increasingly concerned with the **transportation crisis** facing our community.” He said that the infrastructure in general is inadequate and that it promotes intolerable congestion and delay.

Specific improvements the Assemblymember is championing include:

- ◆ Traffic calming on Nassau Avenue to deter trucks from making illegal turns.
- ◆ Bicycle parking improvements and more bike lanes in Williamsburg.
- ◆ Better service on the L and G trains.
- ◆ Comprehensive transportation study and plan for north Brooklyn.

The article noted that “rather than simply dealing with transportation problems as they arise, the DOT should work to prevent them in the first place,” and that an anticipatory approach is especially important in light of growth anticipated by the Williamsburg/Greenpoint rezoning and the proposed Atlantic Yards project. ❖

#### **NJ Traffic Enforcement Stepping Up?**

Some New Jersey counties and municipalities are taking actions of their own to address the state’s culture of **law-breaking on the road**. Governor Corzine and state agencies announced a new pedestrian safety initiative in September.

Such efforts are sorely needed. The *Montclair Times* reports that many of the record number of drivers in Montclair receiving tickets under a new traffic crackdown there are unaware they were breaking the law. The town’s campaign also goes beyond handing out tickets. The “**Walk Safe Montclair**” **campaign** includes large banners reminding motorists to yield and a media campaign informing drivers of their duty to pedestrians.

Montclair police are also collecting data on the most troublesome spots for walkers. The data will eventually be presented to the town engineer, in hopes that modest reconfiguration of intersections or crosswalks can make the locations safer. Montclair Police Office Dan Pronti told the *Montclair Times* “It’s been going well. We’re letting people know we’re out there and to be cognizant they do have to yield to pedestrians in crosswalks.”

Montclair is not alone. The *Passaic Herald-News* recently described a four-county (Passaic, Bergen, Hudson, Essex) effort that issued a thousand tickets in one day.

With NJDOT increasing pedestrian safety spend-

ing (MTR #539) and local and county governments prioritizing law enforcement, NJ might salvage some good news from a year shaping up to be its deadliest in years. ❖

### Riders Flocking, Funds Lagging

Nassau County Legislature Presiding Officer **Judy Jacobs** announced last week that she would seek an additional \$300,000 in the county budget for Long Island Bus to study “future transportation patterns.”

“If we are to keep ahead of the curve and provide Nassau County residents with transportation services they need, we need to make a commitment to the riders of Long Island Bus,” she said. “We intend to find a way to accomplish that in the 2007 budget and beyond.”

The announcement came a day after an opinion piece in *Newsday* by the Tri-State Transportation Campaign’s Kate Slevin called on elected officials to increase support for Long Island Bus to catch up with spiraling ridership levels. **Use of Nassau County’s buses grew 22%** between 1996 and 2005. The system saw a 3% increase in ridership between 2004 and 2005, and is on track for an additional 5% jump this year. County Executive Thomas Suozzi proposed a static \$10.5 million allocation for the bus service in his fiscal 2007 budget. This amount remains at less than half of County support for bus service in 1999, not counting for inflation.

After Jacobs’ announcement, bus riders who are members of Long Island ACORN asked that the \$300,000 be given **directly to tangible service improvements**, rather than to a study about it.

Recent funding problems continue a long-term problem in which the state, MTA, and Nassau County battle over who will pay for the system from year to year. This has made it very difficult for Long Island Bus operators to plan for increases in service, since annual allocations fluctuate.

Long Island Bus president Neil Yellin told *Newsday* that the system needed **an additional \$3 million this year** from the Nassau Legislature. He said between 2008 and 2011, the agency needs at least \$25 million more than it anticipates receiving to **buy new buses** and expand service.

County Executive Suozzi’s office said that if the county legislature wants to increase funding for Long Island Bus, it must find the money elsewhere in Nassau’s budget. Slevin’s op-ed **challenged Suozzi** to allocate more county support or else turn his position favoring stronger MTA support from a way to duck the issue **into a real campaign**. Suozzi is pursuing long range studies for new rail systems in central Nassau, but the inability of the county and region to support growing bus ridership there gives that discussion a strong flavor of unreality. ❖

### How Good or Bad Are NYC’s Streets?

Mayor Bloomberg released his annual Mayor’s Management Report (MMR) earlier this month, to little fanfare. The transportation section of the report is the usual compendium of internal transportation department preoccupations (“Streetlight defects responded to within 10 days of notification”) that say little about the public experience of travel within New York City. Glaringly absent is any metric of traffic congestion or travel times.

One notable exception is the report on street conditions. According to the MMR, **an impressive 69.9 percent of city lane miles are rated in “good” condition** by the city. The report says 30 percent are in fair condition, with only one-tenth of one percent in poor condition.

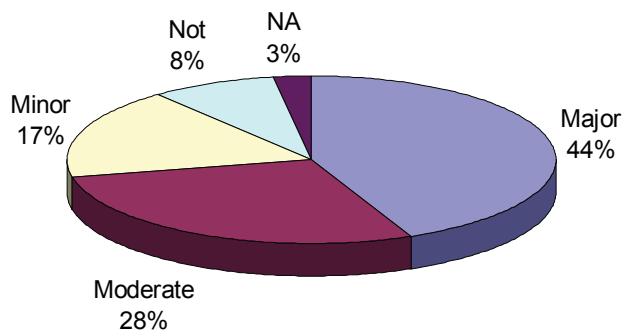
The rating clashes somewhat with the public view of city streets. A Tri-State Campaign survey conducted earlier this year found that 44 percent of city residents believe **physical conditions of city streets and highways are a major problem**, with an additional 28 percent saying conditions are a moderate problem.

Indeed, our own subjective experience, especially those of us who bicycle on city streets, leads us to question the highly favorable assessment by the NYC DOT Highway Inspection and Quality Assurance Unit. It’s possible that relatively brief encounters with blocks or other sections of badly cratered pavement **colors the broader perception** of city streets by motorists, pedestrians and cyclists. Even allowing for such an effect, however, implies that there is a significant amount of cracked, gouged, folded and otherwise destroyed pavement influencing public opinion.

It’s also possible the rating system is overly-

### New Yorkers on Street Conditions

“Do you consider the **condition of streets and highways** a major, moderate, or minor problem, or not a problem?”



Tri-State Transportation Campaign opinion poll of 800 New Yorkers on traffic and transportation issues (conducted by Michaels Opinion Research), May-June 2006. Margin of error  $\pm 3.5$  percentage points.

generous to street managers. The system showing 70% "good" is indeed **unique to NYC**, even though it uses terms similar to the quintile gradings used by the Federal Highway Administration to describe pavement conditions around the country.

According to the NYC DOT press office, inspectors rate 50 percent of the city's lane miles each year, assigning each street a number from 1 to 10 (10 being best), based on the observed levels of distress. A street with 50 to 75 percent of its surface covered in defects would receive a rating of 3. These numerical ratings are then grouped into the three categories of "poor," "fair" and "good." In contrast, the feds use a five-part scale of "poor," "mediocre," "fair," "good" and "very good," with the rankings based on quantitative measurements according to an "International Roughness Index." **Nationwide, just over 50 percent** of lane miles receive a rating of "good" or better under the IRI. In New York State, only 44 percent of lane-miles achieve that rating.

Interestingly, the Fund for the City of New York studied NYC street surfaces in 1998 and 2001 using a car equipped with sensors that measured street smoothness (see [www.fcny.org/cmgp/streets/](http://www.fcny.org/cmgp/streets/)). The Fund launched its studies in part because focus

groups had strongly identified pavement conditions with city government performance. It applied a variant of the International Roughness Index but did not use FHWA ratings, which are apparently based on 50 mph vehicle speeds. Overall, the studies found broadly that about 58% of city streets were "acceptably smooth."

More objective measurement of city transportation conditions and trends could be forthcoming if the City Council passes **Intro 199**, a bill that would direct NYC DOT to adopt a new set of performance measures that will help the city chart a course to better conditions and less congestion (*MTR #527*). It is possible the bill will be heard in the Council's transportation committee this fall. ❖

## CALENDAR

**October 19**, 4:30-6:30pm. Metro-North Railroad Commuter Council meeting. MTA Headquarters, 347 Madison Avenue, 10th Floor Conference Room, Manhattan. 212-878-7087.

**October 20-22**. Thunderhead Training Winning Campaigns: A professional campaign training series for leaders of bicycle and pedestrian advocacy organizations. Philadelphia, PA. For info, etc., [www.thunderheadalliance.org](http://www.thunderheadalliance.org).

**October 24**, 6-8pm. Update on Vision42's plan for an auto-free rail line and boulevard on Manhattan's 42nd St. Community International Forum, SUNY College of Optometry, 33 West 42nd Street, Manhattan. 212-475-3394.

**October 26**, 12:00-2:00pm. NYC Transit Riders Council meeting. 347 Madison Avenue, 5th Floor, Manhattan. 212-878-7087.

**October 26**, 6-9pm. Tri-State Transportation Campaign annual gala. See box at left.

**November 1**, 8:30am-12pm. Forum: "Transit Oriented Development in the Metropolitan Region." NYU Wagner, Puck Building, 295 Lafayette St. RSVP by October 25 to [mnn2@nyu.edu](mailto:mnn2@nyu.edu).

**November 8**, 9am. NJ Transit board meeting. NJ Transit Headquarters, One Penn Plaza East, 9th Floor, Newark. [njtboard@njtransit.com](mailto:njtboard@njtransit.com).

**November 17**, 8am-4pm. Smart Growth Long Island Summit 2006. Huntington Town House, Huntington LI. Vision Long Island 631-261-0242.

**December 13**, 9am. NJ Transit board meeting. NJ Transit Headquarters, One Penn Plaza East, 9th Floor, Newark. [njtboard@njtransit.com](mailto:njtboard@njtransit.com).

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

### TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN'S

## ANNUAL GALA

Our honoree this year is **Elliot G. Sander**, Senior Vice-President of DMJM Harris and a co-founder and chair of the Empire State Transportation Alliance, a business and planning partnership that has played key advocacy roles in the formation of the past two Metropolitan Transportation Authority five-year capital programs.

**THURSDAY, OCTOBER 26TH, 2006**

**6PM-9PM**

**DRINKS AND HORS D'OEUVRES**

Henry's Loft, 29 East 19th Street, 2nd Floor  
Manhattan rsvp required

Invitations are in the mail. If you do not receive one and would like to attend, please contact Teresa at 212-268-7474 or [tt@tstc.org](mailto:tt@tstc.org). Please join us!