

Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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NEWS

Blame Trenton, Not Transit

New Jersey Transit's announcement that it is seeking its second fare hike in three years is a symptom of New Jersey's badly mired politics of transportation finance.

Consider: if fares rise in 2007, it will be the third transit fare increase in the state in this decade, for a roughly **33% price rise** across the range of bus and rail fares. Consumer price inflation in New Jersey is likely to have been about 21% from 2000-2007, if 2006 rates hold through this year.

Meanwhile, tolls on the Garden State Parkway have not increased **since the 1980s**, when the general rate increased to 35 cents. Since then, inflation has eroded the purchasing power of the toll by 40%. In other words, in 1989 dollars, the Parkway toll is now worth around 21 cents. The New Jersey **gas tax is one of the lowest in the United States**, and has also not been increased in nearly 20 years. Inflation has today rendered the 10.5-cent per gallon tax into the value equivalent of a 1988 nickel. The erosion of purchasing power of road-related revenue has in part been masked by increased driving, but it has also led to massive state borrowing to keep transportation programs rolling.

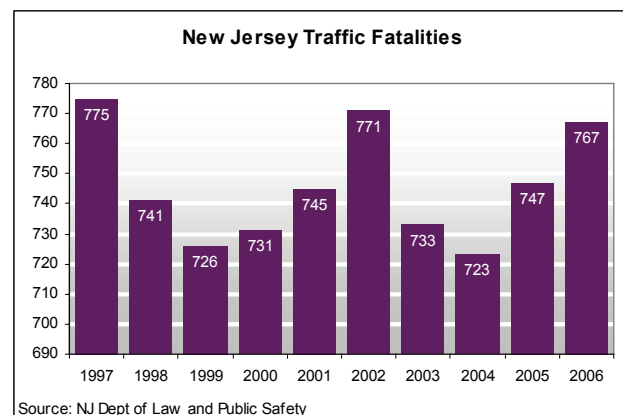
NJ Turnpike tolls have increased more frequently—most recently in 1999 and 2002 (both approved during the Whitman administration), using the political calculus that the highway captures more out-of-state money. But under Governor Corzine, New Jersey has not proposed raising a thin dime of new transportation revenue until last week's fare hike announcement. Last year, Corzine elected to dig even deeper into New Jersey's huge transportation finance hole with a big new round of borrowing and debt financing (*MTR #'s 521, 525*).

It's no way to run a railroad, or a vital, complicated and heavily-used set of state transportation systems. As we pointed out in 2005's fare increase proceedings, NJ Transit is the largest American mass transit system that has **no dedicated source of operating revenue** (*MTR #'s 481, 482*). It relies instead on piecemeal annual offerings by Trenton. As a result, Transit pays each year for about \$350 million worth of regular operations with funds supposed to go to system investments such as new and expanded infrastructure and vehicle fleets. ❖

Road Deaths Rise in New Jersey, Connecticut

767 people died in traffic collisions on New Jersey's roadways in 2006, including nearly 170 pedestrians, according to preliminary data from the Department of Law and Public Safety. Total fatalities were up 3 percent from the previous year.

2006 was an **especially bad year for New Jersey pedestrians**. 167 pedestrians were killed in traffic collisions during the year, up more than 9 percent from 2005. In the last ten years, only 2002 had a greater number of pedestrian deaths. Middlesex, Essex, and Ocean counties had the highest number of pedestrian fatalities, with 23, 18, and 16 respec-



tively.

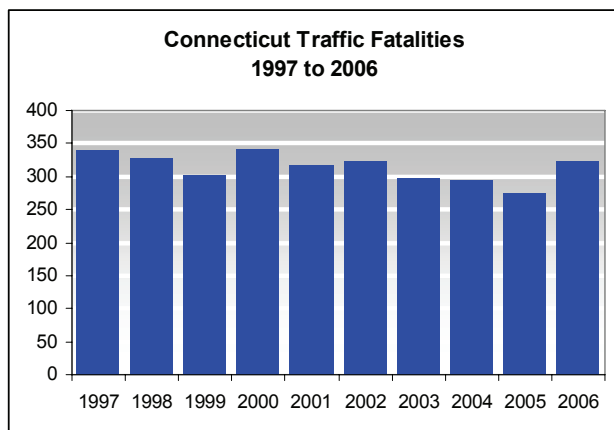
Governor Corzine launched a new pedestrian safety campaign in September but nothing has been heard of the initiative's progress since then.

Sharp increases in traffic deaths were seen in Camden, Hunterdon, Middlesex and Ocean counties, while deaths fell significantly in Bergen and Monmouth counties. Middlesex County, with 69 fatalities had the greatest number of traffic deaths, with Ocean County a close second with 64 deaths.

(We reported in *MTR #'s 531 and 538* that 2006 was on track to be the deadliest year for New Jersey motorists and pedestrians in decades. Fortunately, the pace of fatal road carnage slowed significantly since then, so that New Jersey missed setting such a dubious record.)

The improving trend in Connecticut over recent years was reversed in 2006 as 325 people were killed on the state's roadways, according to preliminary ConnDOT data. Traffic deaths had been stead-

ily dropping since 2000, reaching the lowest number in years in 2005.



Data on traffic crash death and injuries compiled by NY State agencies generally takes much longer to reach the public than the accessible, to-date systems run by New Jersey and Connecticut. ❖

Connecticut's Bus Needs

A new report by the CT Association for Community Transportation calls attention to the unmet needs of Connecticut's bus system, stating that there is \$10.3 million in unfunded operational needs and \$74.9 million of capital spending needed just to keep the existing bus system running and adequately funded. An additional \$19 million in operating spending and \$120 million in capital investment is needed just to offer modest increases in service.

Statewide, these needs result largely from cuts to the bus system under Governor Rowland. **Statewide bus ridership has declined** by 5-6 million rides annually since 2000 due to these reductions. Statewide ridership is now about 35 million annually. Some minor improvements have been made by a few transit districts, but those have only included items that cost no money. So while transit districts are doing what they can with what they have, they require significant resources to restore prior levels of service and add to it.

The CACT recommends the new and improved services identified in ConnDOT's 2000 "Statewide Bus System Study." They include new crosstown routes through Hartford, New Haven, and Bridgeport, new express routes from Metro-North stations to major employment centers in Trumbull, Shelton, and Monroe. The group also favors express buses along Route 1 and new service between Bridgeport and Danbury. ❖

The Tri-State Transportation Campaign web site:

www.tstc.org

Riders' Council: Rail Barely on Track in CT

The Connecticut Commuter Rail Council recently released its annual report on the state's passenger train service (see www.trainweb.org/ct). The group called it a "commuters-eye view of rider frustration" regarding the New Haven Line and Shore Line East.

The group says that among riders' main woes are parking shortages at train stations, decrepit stations and old and overcrowded train cars.

Commuters seeking annual station parking permits are stuck on waiting lists for years in some cases. Meanwhile, daily parking spots are too few and too costly.

Connecticut DOT has also known for years that its stations **need millions of dollars in repairs**, but hasn't found the money to systematically address the issue. Commuters complain of damaged stairwells, rusting support structures, and unsightly graffiti. They seek open bathrooms and waiting rooms.

Trains that **should have been retired years ago** are still in service, except when they aren't—on an average day, 17% of CT's rail cars are being repaired or inspected. Additionally, one out of five rush hour trains has more passengers than seats, and the Council sees more crowding to come.

Operationally, CT's rail commuters want better communication from rail workers and officials during service problems.

It's not all bad news. Metro-North runs 97% of its trains on time. And, thanks to the work of Governor Rell and the state legislature, a new and modern fleet of cars has finally been ordered. But these cars won't arrive **until at least 2009**. Until then, the report urges Metro-North to continue rehabilitating its existing stock. Also, 10 of the 33 Virginia Rail cars that they state bought to refurbish are now up and running. The rest will be on the rails by late 2007.

Looking to the future, however, the Council expresses concern that "skeletal" levels of rail staffing at ConnDOT may not provide sufficient capacity to allow the state to advance both rolling stock replacement and expansion projects like the partly-funded New Haven-Springfield line simultaneously. It also taps the foundering, poorly-served Danbury and Waterbury branch lines as persistent, unaddressed problems, and argues for better weekend service on Shore Line East. The Council is unhappy over the \$1 fare surcharge included in the state's recent funding package, arguing that it will cause a high percentage rate hike for in-state riders. ❖

Dems More Assertive on Amtrak

Senator Frank Lautenberg recently introduced a new long-term funding bill for Amtrak which would provide the ailing passenger railroad \$19.2 billion in spending authority over six years. More than \$6.3 billion of that amount would be available for capital

grants, including enough federal funding to bring the beleaguered Northeast Corridor up to a state of good repair. The bill would also provide \$3.3 billion in operating subsidies over six years, and includes significant sums for debt repayment.

If passed, Lautenberg's Passenger Rail Improvement and Investment Act would be the first long-term Amtrak funding bill since the previous version expired in 2002. Amtrak has been limping along with year-to-year appropriations since then, under repeated threats by the Bush administration to zero-out its budget.

Importantly, the bill would give New Jersey Transit more authority over infrastructure investment and operational decisions. NJTransit serves 55 million passenger trips on Northeast Corridor tracks every year, yet currently has little say over investment and scheduling. The agency has long blamed Amtrak for delaying commuter trains by giving Amtrak trains preferential scheduling. Transit recently calculated that its passengers suffered 157 hours of delays in the last two years because of Amtrak.

Giving commuter rail systems and freight operators more say in operations and infrastructure investment was also a central theme of the Northeast Corridor Action Plan, a proposal released late last year by Rutgers University's Voorhees Transportation Policy Institute. It proposed that Amtrak relinquish ownership of the 456-mile Northeast Corridor to the USDOT, and that a new public benefit corporation (with representation from the various stakeholders) be formed to manage it.

The Lautenberg bill does not go so far as to create a new managing body for the Northeast Corridor, but Rutgers/Voorhees director Martin Robins told the *Bergen Record* that it would "...create a policy foundation and funding foundation for the future of intercity rail."

Supporters of the bill are optimistic about its passage. A similar bill was overwhelmingly approved by the Senate in 2005, but did not make it through conference committee with the House. Rep. James Oberstar of Minnesota, who recently took over chairmanship of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, has promised to make Amtrak funding one of his top priorities this year. ❖

Save the Date

Regional Plan Association 2007 Regional Assembly

"A Bright Green Future: Climate Change, Energy & Growth for the Tri-State Metropolitan Region"

Friday, May 4

The Waldorf Astoria, Manhattan

www.rpa.org

Verrazano Flap: MTA Toll Reform Needed

Remarks by Congressman Jerrold Nadler about using the Democratic majority in Congress to remove the federal law mandating one-way toll collection on the Verrazano Narrows Bridge caused the predictable firestorm in Staten Island, where local Democratic politicians organized a letter to new U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to warn her against any change in Verrazano toll status.

Nadler says he never had any intention of ramming such a move down Staten Island's throat, but that the introduction of high-speed E-ZPass where vehicles could register a toll payment without slowing down could render the direction of toll collection irrelevant. One-way toll collection at double the usual MTA rate (now amounting to \$9) deters some regional traffic from using the Verrazano/Staten Island Expressway route, sending it instead through downtown Brooklyn and lower Manhattan's Canal Street to the free East River bridges and west-bound Holland Tunnel. Nadler also held out the idea that some of the recaptured toll revenue could be slated for projects on Staten Island.

Congressman Vito Fossella, who has pushed the MTA and Port Authority on high speed tolls in the past, said the tolls would have to be cash-free in order for him to consider eliminating the one-way toll.

The practical way forward is for the MTA to eliminate its goal gates and join other regional toll agencies in moving toward non-stop tolls. The MTA has issued a number of reasons for declining to do so over the years (MTR #'s 417, 462). We think it mostly comes down to fear of losing money to toll cheats, especially with big deficits expected at the MTA in 2008. That's a problem that can be solved via technology and energetic enforcement efforts, perhaps pooled across the region's agencies (see below). We hope new leadership at the MTA and in Albany will break the gridlock over modern toll applications, and eventually, Verrazano toll policy. ❖

Pennsylvania Makes Money on Toll Cheats

The problem of revenue "leakage" at toll systems that don't require a full stop before payment has always seemed to us a matter of efficient enforcement. Since violators pay more than law-abiding toll customers, a high enforcement rate should make toll cheating a revenue-positive phenomenon for toll road agencies like the MTA.

New Jersey papers have recently focused on the issue in light of news that the Turnpike and Garden State Parkway are not following up on about \$10 million in annual toll losses. They note that a more rigorous system in Pennsylvania netted about \$4 million in 2005 above what agencies would have received in regular revenue by catching toll evaders and hitting them with big penalties. ❖

LIRR Third Track Flack

The LIRR is sharing updated plans for its third track project, which would add another track to the Main Line between Bellerose and Hicksville, with local towns. *Newsday* reported last week that small portions (generally a few feet) of about 80 plots of land would need to be taken. 27 of them are in New Hyde Park. Apparently, many of the takings are required for the project's **grade crossing eliminations** — which would place roadways that now run across the tracks into underpasses — not for the track expansion itself. Ironically, the communities of Floral Park, Bellerose, and New Hyde Park have almost hysterically opposed the third track but have generally supported grade crossing elimination because it will provide local traffic improvements.

The overall Main Line project is necessary to expand train service and for Long Island to reap full benefits of the LIRR East Side Access project, expected to be complete in 2012. It will also ease travel for reverse commuters who are increasingly important to Long Island's economy but now see very infrequent train service at peak hours. All the major environmental, planning, business and labor groups on Long Island support the project. *Newsday* does as well. In an editorial yesterday, the paper said the third track: "is **exceedingly important to Long Island's economic future** and safety of com-

Weighing In on Heavy Trucks

Brooklyn lawmaker Joe Lentol has submitted a new bill in the NY State Assembly to allow New York City to begin pilot truck weight monitoring and enforcement programs. The bill, A1717, would authorize NYC to **embed weight sensors** and install cameras to monitor up to 50 locations around the city. When the sensors detect a vehicle over a pre-programmed weight limit, the camera would activate and photograph the truck's license plate. The vehicle owner would then receive a summons by mail. However, no companion bill has been introduced yet in the State Senate.

Truck impacts on infrastructure and communities are a common complaint around the city, and an increasing problem for city and state agencies. Overweight trucks are part of the problem. Trucks cause most of the **wear and tear on streets, highways and bridges** because pavement and other structural damage to road infrastructure is an exponential function of axle weight, and truck volumes are booming. Last year, weight restrictions were enforced for the **Throgs Neck and Whitestone Bridges** after stress cracks were found on both structures. ❖

muters," and that the MTA should "move full speed ahead." The editorial board called opposition "small minded and politically motivated."

The election on February 6 for the State Senate seat vacated by Republican Senator Balboni, a strong opponent of the project and now head of NY's Homeland Security office, between Democratic Craig Johnson and Republican Maureen O'Connell could change the local politics of the project. O'Connell ardently opposes the project. Johnson has voiced more modest concerns, but has **Governor Spitzer**, a strong supporter of the project, campaigning for him. ❖

CALENDAR

January 31, 1pm. The Bloustein School at Rutgers University will present "Turnpike for Sale? Privatization and Public Interest." NJ DOT Commissioner Kris Kolluri, NJ Public Finance Director Nancy Feldman, and Alexis Perrotta of RPA. Bloustein School, 33 Livingston Avenue, New Brunswick. 732-932-6812 x552.

February 1, 11:45am. Transportation Research Forum NY Chapter. Bruce Willbrandt, Deputy Chief Engineer, Amtrak. 100 Washington Street, Manhattan. \$. www.trforum.org. 212-435-4226.

February 1, 5:30-7pm and 7-9pm. Symposium and reception for exhibit: "Robert Moses & the Modern City: Remaking the Metropolis." Museum of the City of New York, 1220 Fifth Avenue, Manhattan. 212-534-1672, x3395.

February 2, 9:30am-Noon. The University Transportation Research Center: "Transit Regulation and Privatization: The European Experience." Matthew G. Karlaftis, National Tech. University of Athens. Baruch College, 151 E. 25th St., # 750, Manhattan. 212-650-8050.

February 6, 6:30pm. MTA public hearing on extension of S55 bus route to serve additional communities on weekdays. Auditorium, The Louis Desario School, 250 Kramer Avenue, Staten Island NY. 212-878-7483.

More calendar items at www.tstc.org

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



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