

Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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NEWS

Public Unhappy with Parkway Process

The *Asbury Park Press* editorial board wrote recently that the NJ Turnpike Authority's plan to widen the Garden State Parkway has moved too fast, and in **rushing to issue permits** for the project, the NJ Dept. of Environmental Protection "is showing an alarming disregard of the environment and the public's right to be informed."

The NJDEP held the first public hearing for the Parkway widening project January 30. The project would add another lane in both directions between exits 30 and 80. The NJ Turnpike Authority, which runs the Parkway, must obtain four different DEP permits for the widening. They involve water and air pollution, storm water runoff, and coastal management.

Of the 100 or so people that showed up to express concerns about the project, speakers testified most **against likely environmental impacts**, and asked for sound barriers to reduce increased traffic noise. Many speakers demanded more hearings and greater public input, some saying the state was intentionally denying them the information they need.

Citizens are right in their claims. Project documents have not been readily available to the public, it is the **Internet Age**, yet **nothing about the project is on-line**, and the Turnpike Authority intends to spend hundreds of millions in public toll revenue for the new lanes. The DEP's own preliminary analysis concluded that the Turnpike Authority applications contained insufficient information to grant the permits, and the Turnpike Authority's rambling-yet-brief oral presentations on the project have raised more questions than they resolved.

The American Littoral Society, the NJ Sierra Club and Save Barnegat Bay joined the Campaign at a press conference a week after the hearing to ask DEP to provide more forums for participation and release more information. The DEP responded in the press that it will not grant permits prematurely.

Substantively, we are concerned that the project represents a **throwback to reflexive highway widening** and that the new lanes are destined to re-fill with traffic a short time after their construction. The Campaign has urged the Turnpike Authority to consider sustainable congestion relief measures like high-occupancy/toll (HOT) lanes. ❖

The Next Generation

Governor Eliot Spitzer's appointment of **Astrid Glynn** to lead the NY State Dept. of Transportation has barely dented the vacancies at the tops of the metropolitan region's transportation agencies, especially with the announced departure of **Iris Weinsshall** from the helm of NYC's transportation department. Weinsshall recently said she would leave NYC DOT as of April 13.

City transportation reformers issued various hoped-for job descriptions in response, urging the Bloomberg administration to embrace traffic calming, traffic relief and pro-transit priorities. Some City Council members agreed, joining advocates in a City Hall press conference to urge more innovation and vision on NYC DOT's part.

Astrid Glynn is unknown in NY State (though went to law school in Albany) but held positions responsible for school construction, transportation planning and mass transit in Massachusetts' Romney administration. Her participation in Governor Romney's experiments in breaking down functional barriers between state planning and infrastructure agencies and in creating **incentives to move municipalities toward smart growth** should serve Glynn well as she attempts to invigorate NYSDOT around priorities articulated by Governor Spitzer, including better land use planning and corresponding transportation priorities.

Searches continue for chief executives for NYC Transit, Long Island Rail Road and New Jersey Transit, though MTA director Elliot Sander recently named Millard Seay, long-time city bus boss, as NYC Transit's acting president. ❖

Paying the Piper for Transit Expansion

The notes of fiscal sanity coming from MTA headquarters regarding the Bloomberg administration's desire to extend the #7 subway train to Manhattan's far West Side are just the latest indication that new management has taken over the downstate mass transit system.

MTA executive director Elliot Sander recently wrote to legislators and last week elaborated to newspapers that there was no way the transit agency could pick up the tab for **cost overruns** that occur as the #7 tunnel is extended west of Times Square.

The city has agreed to pay \$2.1 billion for the project, but the problem of costs exceeding that amount had never been ironed out, and watchdogs have been fearful that the MTA will be stuck with such costs once construction is underway.

There are likely to be other costs for the project that the MTA could ultimately become responsible for. Sander identified **rail cars** to serve the longer line as one of them. The cost of a station at 10th Avenue and 41st/42nd Street is another. City government is only going to **pay for one station**, at the line's terminus at 34th St. and 11th Ave. The project's length clearly calls for an intermediate station, but the responsibility of paying for the work may well become a years- or decades-long stand-off.

NYC Deputy Mayor Daniel Doctoroff told the *NY Times* that the deal worked out by Sander's predecessors and the city obligated the MTA to pay for costs exceeding \$2.1 billion, but that the issue seemed moot since there was no indication that cost estimates would be exceeded.

Construction costs escalating

But rapidly escalating materials costs, on a global basis, are now a **widely acknowledged** part of the construction business. Our region is also undergoing a major building boom that is about to be augmented by the start of work on large scale transportation projects like the Second Ave. subway, with more waiting in the wings. The boom is pressuring the cost of labor and may also be already straining the capacity of the region's heavy building industry.

The broad transportation industry sees cost escalation as so acute that it is launching a series of task forces to find cost savings. One is internal to the MTA and is already in formation.

MTA facing record deficit

Containing costs and avoiding open-ended deals are clearly critical priorities for the MTA. A presentation by Sander to the NY State Legislature's budget committees earlier this month underscored the MTA's precarious financial position. Due in large measure to **ballooning costs of debt** stemming from the past two MTA **five-year construction programs**, but also because of climbing health, pension, energy and other costs, the downstate transit system is facing an estimated \$805 million deficit in 2008, growing to nearly \$1.8 billion in 2010. The agency is on the brink of major construction work on the LIRR East Side Access and Second Avenue subway projects, faces a huge job to continue and accelerate progress toward a state of good repair in the NYC transit system, and continues to attract high ridership levels.

(Sander's testimony and presentation to the legislature is on-line at www.mta.info/mta/news/public/finpres.htm). ❖

No Data, No Peace !

Testifying before the City Council on Intro. 199, a bill to improve NYC transportation data collection and performance measures, outgoing NYCDOT Commissioner Iris Weinshall challenged the bill's suggestion that New York City's transportation-related data collection efforts don't go far enough. Commissioner Weinshall told the Council, "the City Charter already requires the submittal of objectives and indicators as detailed in the Mayor's Management Report (MMR) and, therefore, any legislation to require additional reporting seems redundant."

Press coverage of the hearing focused on Weinshall's statements that traffic congestion is more a matter of perception owing to bigger vehicles rather than growing numbers of them. Leaving aside the obvious fact that vehicle size matters to congestion—the same number of people driving trucks take up a lot more room than if they were on bicycles — the absence of any real information about traffic or congestion trends in the city in the commissioner's testimony seemed to argue for the Council's proposal.

And as we have reported before, most recently in *MTR #540*, the MMR's transportation section is, for the most part, a compendium of statistics on NYC DOT activity that have little influence on New Yorkers' overall travel experience. The data the MMR provides generally lacks any real-world context. Repairing 30,000 potholes may not be a big accomplishment, for instance, if 300,000 others remain on the streets.

Other published DOT reports examine traffic flow in and out of the boroughs as well as on the city's bridges and tunnels. But aside from short-term studies of specific DOT initiatives, the DOT's library excludes congestion data. An analysis by Schaller Consulting for Transportation Alternatives, *Traffic Information in NYC*, found data gaps in the city's transportation data, including 1) Incomplete city-wide and borough-wide traffic data, 2) No traffic volumes for congested corridors outside Manhattan, and 3) No information about the share of total trips by different modes of travel.

It's possible that **Mayor Bloomberg's new sustainability plan** (PlaNYC) will push the city toward better data collection. The mayor has set a goal of **improving travel times** in the city (see *MTR #546*), even as population and congestion on streets and mass transit systems increase. Presently, the U.S. Census provides the only consistent source of travel time data, through its Decennial surveys and its new annual American Community Survey (both show travel times increasing in recent years). But **sample sizes** in the annual Census data are **too low** to give any indication of how travel times are changing at

the neighborhood or even borough level (and citywide data is suspect too). For travel times to improve, the city will need exactly this data to figure out where to provide bus rapid transit, expand subway service, etc.

The Bloomberg administration missed a golden opportunity to build support through Intro. 199 for new metrics of sustainable transportation. The Council should pass Intro 199, explicitly charging the city administration to come through with a way to measure progress on sustainability goals. ❖

The Limits of Smart Planning

A transit village plan for Hamilton, the stop just north of Trenton along the Northeast Corridor, has run badly afoul of local politics and may be a cautionary lesson about trying to ram sound planning principles through a local dissensus. NJ Transit may want to focus its station-area development planning elsewhere until Hamilton Township decides what it wants.

Local sentiment in Hamilton has opposed a plan for 300 housing units, along with retail and offices near the station site. Because nearly 700 other housing units have been approved for a former industrial site close by, many residents opposed the transit village as the last straw overburdening a formerly sleepy area. When a local election bloc harnessed the opposition and ousted most of the town council that had approved the plan, it might have been Transit's cue to head for the hills.

The plan now is in limbo. Assemblyman Bill Baroni is attempting to broker a deal between Mayor Glen Gilmore, the council and NJ Transit, but the council wants the transit village minus the housing, while Transit says the other elements will not work without residential development.

The beauty of smart growth from a state-wide or regional point of view is that there are other municipalities to focus on. NJ Transit can create good examples elsewhere while development pressure builds in Hamilton. The same is true for NJ DOT's smart corridor development program. In time, the Hamilton locals may come to see the transit village as their best bet for meeting future housing demand. It is also their prerogative not to, but it is likely that their neighbors who embrace transit-oriented development will be more successful in terms of amenities, quality of life and tax base. ❖

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



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MTR#550

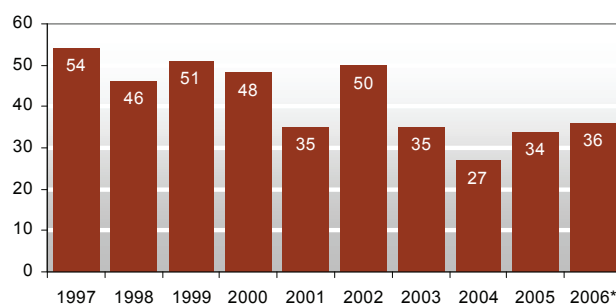
Contributing: Michelle Ernst, Damien Newton, Teresa Toro, Kyle Wiswall Editors: Jon Orcutt, Kate Slevin

Ped Deaths Low (along with walking?)

In *MTR #549* we reported on the spike in **Connecticut traffic fatalities** in 2006, a reversal of the recent downward trend. Now data we have acquired data on pedestrian fatalities for the state show that walking deaths have more or less held steady in recent years, hovering around 35 deaths per year since 2001. The number of pedestrian deaths has generally fallen over the past decade, from a high of 54 in 1997. Pedestrians also make up a significantly smaller share of total fatalities. In 1997, pedestrians accounted for nearly 16 percent of total statewide fatalities. By 2006, that rate had fallen to just over 11 percent.

It's not clear what's behind the drop. The welcome decline in pedestrian fatalities could actually be an indicator not of safer driving, but of fewer walkers on Connecticut's sidewalks. The percent of commuters walking to work has declined 46 percent from 1990 to 2005, and 26 percent in just the six years since 2000, according to Census data, though the Census' "journey to work" data usually significantly undercounts walking and bicycling. ❖

Trend in Connecticut Pedestrian Fatalities



Source: TSTC analysis of NHTSA FARS data, 1997 to 2005 and preliminary ConnDOT data for 2006

CALENDAR

February 26, 5:30-7:45pm. WTS Annual Meeting w Anthony Shorris, Port Authority exec director 40th Street and Park Avenue, Manhattan. Rsvp. Req. \$ rsvp@wtsgny.org 212-973-2923.

February 27, 4-8pm. NYS DOT, Thruway Authority, Metro-North RR open house on Tappan Zee Bridge/I-287 Environmental Review. Performing Arts Center, SUNY Purchase, 735 Anderson Hill Road, Purchase. 518-457-6400. www.tzbsite.com

February 28, 6:30pm. PlanYC 2030 Town Hall Conversation. College of Staten Island, Center for the Arts, Williamson Theater, Staten Island. www.nyc.gov/html/planyc2030/

More calendar items at www.tstc.org