

Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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NEWS

Likely Bloomberg Focus: Transit Finance

At the March 15 annual meeting of the NY Metropolitan Transportation Council, NYC Deputy Mayor Daniel Doctoroff delivered what may have been the strongest expression of interest in NYC's mass transit system by anyone in City Hall in a generation, stating that "**congestion** – in all its forms – traffic, transit and pedestrian, is the **single biggest barrier to growth.**" Doctoroff again laid out the case for infrastructure renewal and transit expansion, arguing that the city is poised to grow and thrive but will only do so if it creates the capacity to house, water, power and move a much greater number of people than it does today. He cited the recent NYC Partnership study on the high economic costs of congestion, and projections showing that the entire existing subway system will be at or over capacity in 2030. He said traffic and congestion was the one thing the PlaNYC team had heard about from citizens in every corner of town.

Recent mayors have generally regarded transit at best as someone else's problem, and at worst as a place to cut for budget savings. But in making the case for transit expansion, Doctoroff's speech was mainly a build-up to the idea that the city and metropolitan region need to get serious about **paying to fix the system** we have, build the expansion projects on the books and look ahead to a next generation of mass transit capacity. With that, he left the audience of planners, industry representatives and civic leaders hanging, promising details in April.

The Paradox of NYC Transportation

One issue that remains unclear from the PlaNYC "sustainability" discussion is whether City Hall adheres to any vision of more human-scaled streets and liveable neighborhoods. Most sustainable city efforts around the world emphasize mass transit to permit physical, psychic and environmental space to be reclaimed from car traffic. NYC, on the other hand, trades off of the efficiency afforded by its big transit system to allow **choking car traffic to dominate its streetscape.** It's unknown whether Bloomberg and Doctoroff want to perpetuate this situation with more capacious subways and commuter railroads, or look ahead to a symbiotic expansion of transit riding, walking, cycling and non-transport uses of the space between buildings. ❖

Parkway Project Designed to Fail

Traffic projections released by the NJ Turnpike Authority show that the section of the Garden State Parkway the Authority proposes to widen will be **as or more congested by 2025** – the widening project's "design year" – with three lanes as it is today with two (design year is the future point which study projections look at—what will traffic be like in 2025 with the project or without it?). The numbers raise the question of why the Turnpike Authority is considering the investment of a half billion dollars in public funds in a project that will buy **only a few years of relief** instead of developing a real strategy for the problem of traffic congestion.

The Turnpike Authority, which runs the Garden State Parkway, plans to add new lanes in each direction to 50 miles of the Parkway, between South Toms River and Somers Point. The project has not been subject to much public discussion, and was generally criticized for catching people by surprise at the sole public hearing the Turnpike Authority and NJ Dept. of Environmental Protection held about it on January 30th (*MTR #550*).

Data in the project EIS and public presentations by Turnpike officials show that traffic growth from 2005 to 2025 will both outpace the 50% increase in road space the project will represent, and outstrip the rated capacity of a three lane highway in various sub-segments of the widened stretch before the design year.

The Tri-State Campaign has inquired and urged the Turnpike Authority several times to consider aggressive demand management measures to ensure that any public investment in **new transportation capacity isn't simply consumed** in the age-old cycle of road expansion and traffic growth. The Authority's responses have been essentially variations on "we're not doing it because we're not doing it."

We note that managed-lane capacity additions have become relatively mainstream within the road industry. The number of agencies creating new high-occupancy toll lanes and implementing demand-management road pricing on existing roads around the United States is large and growing. They include such hot-beds of reform and innovation as the Texas, North Carolina and Florida DOTs. (the FHWA Congestion Pricing Program web-site

has a long list of such projects, that have received federal assistance, at www.ops.fhwa.dot.gov/tolling_pricing/.

The Turnpike's numbers show that the increase of annual average daily traffic (AADT), averaged across all 15 roadway sub-segments it identifies in the section it wants to widen, will exceed the 50% increase in capacity the new lanes will represent in 2021, four years ahead of the "design year" (average AADT will increase by 50.21% from 2005 to 2021, according to the Turnpike). The rather slim EIS for the project does not contain traffic data other than AADT. Although AADT does not capture data such as volume at peak hour, day or season, the growth the Turnpike points to suggests that if the highway is crowded now, it will be more so in the future, or that congested times will expand further throughout the week or day, even with more lanes.

Turnpike AADT projections for particular roadway segments shows that **five segments** will see traffic volumes **over the rated AADT capacity** for a three lane highway by the design year. The Exit 74 to Exit 80 stretch would be over capacity by 2015, with others following suit from 2022 to 2024.

If one applies the traffic growth rates experienced on the sub-segments over the past ten years instead of the Turnpike's projections, the Exit 74 to 80 section would be **overcapacity in 2009**, the year construction is slated to be completed! Other segments would follow between 2015 and 2021. The average AADT for all segments exceeds rated capacity for three lanes in the 2025 design year. Conditions will be worse still if projections are low by just a few percent, or if booming southern New Jersey sees faster future growth than it has in the past decade.

The big question is why Turnpike Authority officials are **staring future failure in the face** without doing anything about it. The Authority also wants to undertake major widening south of Exit 8 on its namesake highway, and we suspect its projections show looming problems on the northern stretches of both toll roads, where no new lanes are anticipated. **Managed and priced lanes** are the obvious ways to ensure sustainable road capacity additions, and as a toll road agency whose roadways see some of the highest traffic volumes in the country, we should expect the Turnpike Authority to be in the forefront of such innovation. NJ DOT officials say publicly that widening highways while doing nothing else is a fool's errand in the 21st Century. When will the Turnpike Authority catch on? ❖

The Tri-State Transportation Campaign web site:

www.tstc.org

SAVE THE DATE!

Tuesday, APRIL 24th: TSTC First Annual New Jersey Fundraiser—in Newark's Ironbound neighborhood. Please join us!

Honoring outgoing executive director George Warrington and former NJDOT Commissioner Jack Lettiere for their major roles in getting NJ transportation policy on track. For info, call us at 212-268-7474.

Connecticut Talks Congestion Pricing

Unlike the NJ Turnpike Authority, Connecticut's leaders are considering innovative traffic demand strategies for the state's roadways.

The South West Regional Planning Agency (SWRPA), the regional planning organization for the Fairfield County area, hopes in April to submit its third application to the federal government's Value Pricing Program to study congestion pricing on a statewide level, including Interstates I-84, Merritt Parkway and I-95. After some conflict last year over submitting **competing federal applications**, SWRPA and ConnDOT are submitting a joint request, with cooperation from other MPOs, including Housatonic Valley Council of Elected Officials and the Greater Bridgeport Regional Planning Agency. The partnership bodes better for congestion pricing's potential for success.

Neither ConnDOT nor SWRPA has heard back from the Federal Highway Administration about their 2006 applications, but a decision may come within the next month or so. SWRPA applied to study electronic tolls and value pricing in southwestern CT, while ConnDOT sought to examine the conversion of existing HOV lanes on I-84 and I-91 to high-occupancy/toll (**HOT**) lanes (HOT lanes allows car with single passengers to pay a toll to use a dedicated carpool lane). A ConnDOT study a few years back found that the HOV lanes around Hartford are only being used at **half capacity**, so HOT conversion would unlock under-used potential, provide better commutes for those willing to pay and raise new revenue for transportation projects or operations such as more frequent transit service.

Interestingly, the federal Value Pricing Program no longer funds projects that propose to introduce tolls to existing HOV lanes because **such projects have "become mainstream"** (Long Island and NJ Turnpike Authority, take note!). Instead, HOT lane projects fall under another section of the federal transportation funding statute.

Meanwhile, in case efforts to bring federal money to foster roadway pricing fail, the state legislature is considering legislation that would provide state funding for similar work. The bill, which would provide \$4.5 million in state funds, would study pricing technologies, potential toll locations,

and applicability to roads and mass transit. It was recently approved by the transportation committee (see story below). ❖

NJ Fare Hike Will Hurt Cities, Environment

NJ Transit is preparing to raise bus and rail fares for the third time in five years to keep pace with its expanding system and increases in fundamental costs, such as fuel and insurance. If Transit's current proposal is approved, NJ Transit bus fares will have risen by 33% since 2002, compared to general inflation of 16%.

The fare increase will **hit Newark and other cities much harder** than other municipalities in the state. Nearly one-quarter of all NJ Transit trips are made on buses traveling within or through Newark. Most paying higher fares in Newark have lower incomes and will end up devoting more of total household outlay to simply getting around. Governor Corzine recently made much of the **earned income tax credit** he has proposed to help lower income families, but a significant portion of that relief **would be consumed** for mass transit riders by the fare hike.

Corzine could eliminate the price increase for local bus riders altogether by finding about \$9 million in the state budget this year to increase state aid for mass transit operations, a contribution that has remained flat for many years. Last year, facing a big transportation budget deficit, the Corzine administration went to much **greater lengths to ensure that driving costs in the state remained low**. The governor borrowed more money – extending parts of the Transportation Trust Fund debt to 2040 – to keep the state gas tax the third lowest in the country (it was last increased in 1988), and has not sought any revenue increase from the state's toll roads, which studies show charge the lowest rates per mile of any U.S. toll roads (Garden State Parkway tolls were last raised in 1989.).

Governor Corzine also recently committed the state to ambitious greenhouse gas emission targets. As someone with a financial background, the governor should know that **price matters**, and that we won't stop global warming by **keeping driving cheap** while failing to finance transit operations.

No one argues that mass transit fares should never rise. But should they rise every year or two, or be the only part of the transportation system where state government imposes any increase at all? ❖

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

Transportation Still High on Hartford's List

The Connecticut Legislature is considering several bills that address traffic congestion and transit oriented development.

- The first (Substitute H.B. 7149) is an ambitious pilot program to encourage ten municipalities, to be chosen by application to the Office of Policy and Management, to build **new housing**, a significant percentage of which would need to be affordable, **near mass transit centers**. By using a system of financial incentives, including annual educational subsidies and one time construction grants, the state hopes to push developers and municipalities to work together in creating transit village-type affordable housing.

While the bill is clearly a laudable step toward more responsible growth, trouble may lie, as usual, in the definitions. According to the bill, eligible locations for development must be near a transit center, in an area of "concentrated development" (e.g. town center, industrial park?), or in any other area that is suitable "because of existing infrastructure, transportation access or underutilized facilities or location." This final category may swallow the first two since the terms are undefined. Definitional waters are further muddied because the list of eligible locations includes, but is not limited to, the options above. Is a state highway strip mall sufficient as "existing infrastructure?" Could farmland at the edge of suburbia be viewed as an "underutilized location?" While we hope these are unlikely examples, and that OPM will know smart growth when it sees it, any program authorized under this potential statute will bear watching.

- Another transportation committee bill (Committee Bill No. 439) allows the towns of Avon and West Hartford to launch a pilot program using **speed cameras** on Route 44. This is a narrower version of a bill that failed in 2005 which authorized broader use of cameras without an initial pilot study. The current bill calls for signs before each camera to warn drivers that they may be photographed. Cars caught speeding by the cameras will pay a fine not to exceed \$100 and will not be subject to points or other penalties. The bill is on its way to the Committee on Planning and Development. The Connecticut Citizens Transportation Lobby supports speed cameras as a safety measure.

- SB 1401 is an updated omnibus transportation bill that includes several promising initiatives including a rail freight study, a study of congestion pricing (see below), increased bike access to mass transit, and expansion of the Shore Line East commuter line. On the other hand, the bill still contains calls to widen or extend I-95, I-84 and state routes 9, 2, and 2A. It is currently on file with the Legislative Commissioners' Office.

- Senate Bill No. 1353 provides \$4.5 Million (from the state Special Transportation Fund) to the CT

Department of Transportation to study **congestion pricing** along “selected state and federally-funded highways.” The results of the study would be due December 31, 2009. The bill was the subject of a public hearing on March 9 and has just emerged from the transportation committee. ❖

Transit for “New Suburbia?”

In Nassau County Executive Tom Suozzi’s State of the County speech last week, the CE promised to promote growth around transit stations and other areas suitable for more density and a mix of land uses. He called on local leaders in charge of zoning to decide on **10 planned areas for smart growth** and increased development, citing Hempstead and the Nassau Hub area as leaders, with towns like Roosevelt and Hicksville possibly following suit.

As part of his vision of Nassau in 2020, he announced a “Healthy Nassau” initiative to increase cycling and walking opportunities, use cleaner energy, create more organic farms, and reduce the County’s contribution to global warming. The Center for Clean Air Policy has been talking to counties around the nation about similar initiatives. Unfortunately, the CE **did not mention increasing service or funding for Long Island Bus**, though he did praise the agency’s fleet of natural gas-powered vehicles.

However at the NY Metropolitan Transportation Council’s annual meeting last week, MTA Executive Director Elliot Sander said the agency was starting to work towards a **regional bus system**, that could absorb Nassau and perhaps other county bus systems, a move that could resolve Long Island Bus’ chronic funding problem and under-provision of service. ❖

Beyond E-ZPass

The FHWA has awarded roughly \$1 million to the Port Authority for a study of moving from today’s E-ZPass system to “**cashless toll transactions**” that meet the same level of accuracy provided by E-ZPass plus cash booths today. The benefits would be a significant **expansion of open-road tolling**, speeding all customers through collection points, and facilitating “more meaningful congestion charging rates and traffic management incentives in the current non-tolled direction” (e.g., west-bound across the Hudson). The Toronto area has a cashless toll road where cameras record license numbers of cars without electronic toll tags, while London and Stockholm cordon pricing systems also function via a variety of payment options, all of which avoid any cash transaction. We look forward to the PA’s findings. ❖

CALENDAR

March 21, Noon. NYMTC Brown Bag Lunch Presentation by Howard Mann, Freight Planner Manager: "It Takes a Freight Village." NYMTC, 199 Water Street, 22nd Floor, Manhattan. RSVP to 212-383-7201 or trweaver@dot.state.ny.us.

March 22, Noon-2pm. New York City Transit Rider's Council meeting. MTA Headquarters, 347 Madison Avenue, 5th Floor Board Room, Manhattan. 212-878-7087.

March 26, 1-3pm. NYMTC public meeting on its Regional Pedestrian Safety Study. NYMTC, 199 Water Street, 22nd Floor, Manhattan. RSVP to 212-383-7201 or trweaver@dot.state.ny.us by March 22.

March 27, 11am-2pm and 5-8pm. NJ Transit Public Hearing regarding the Draft Environmental Impact Statement for the Access to the Region's Core Study. Fashion Institute of Technology, Great Hall, 27th Street between 7th and 8th Avenues, Manhattan. 877-ARC-0999.

March 28, 7:30am. Business Council of Fairfield County's 2007 Legislative Leadership Breakfast. Sheraton Stamford Hotel, 2701 Summer Street, Stamford. For information or to register, 203-359-3220.

March 28, 9:30am. MTA board meeting. 347 Madison Avenue, 5th Floor Board Room, Manhattan.

March 28, 5-7pm. Metro-North Railroad Commuter Council annual President's Forum, with Metro-North President Peter A. Cannito. MTA Headquarters, 347 Madison Avenue, 5th Floor Board Room, Manhattan. 212-878-7087.

March 28, 6:30pm. Presentation by NYC Dept. of Sanitation on its study regarding solid waste trucks in the Williamsburg community. Our Lady of the Snow, 410 Graham Avenue, Brooklyn. 718-389-0009.

March 29, 5-7:30pm. "Talking Transportation": New Jersey Transportation Planning Authority public participation plan review meeting. Morris County Library Public Meeting Room, 30 East Hanover Avenue, Whippany. 973-639-8400.

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

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



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