

Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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NEWS

NJ Study Calls for Wider Manhattan Sidewalks

Even if NYC transportation officials are not quite there, NJ Transit's study of the implications of **doubling New Jersey train traffic** into Manhattan's West Side spells out the obvious: pedestrian volume around Penn Station is already more than the sidewalks and crosswalks there can handle, and future development and mass transit capacity requires that something be done about it.

If anything, NJ Transit's Access to the Region's Core environmental impact statement (www.accesstotheregionscore.com) understates the problem even while straightforwardly recommending that sidewalks in Manhattan be widened.

The study did not look north of 35th Street, for instance, though the present day impact of Penn Station on Midtown sidewalks and crosswalks certainly extends further uptown. Pedestrians can be seen every morning and evening **walking in the street** all the way between Penn Station and Times Square on 7th Avenue and also frequently along 8th Ave. between 34th and the PA Bus Terminal. The "pedestrian level of service" findings also seem overly optimistic. If people are walking in the avenues for blocks, one would expect more "F" conditions than the study finds. But the specific numbers are largely irrelevant – it's enough to know that the sidewalks are failing and that New York City forces transit commuters to walk in heavily trafficked avenues to understand that large additions of rail capacity and more development in the area will obviously make the walking environment even worse.

It's noteworthy that the analysis does not consider the possibility of future high-rise development (the "Garden swap") in the Penn Plaza-Madison Square Garden super-block, which would crowd the pedestrian environment even further. Clearly something will have to give, and community boards, civic leaders and elected officials should use the Manhattan pedestrian and traffic analyses in the ARC DEIS as a starting point to demand a realistic Midtown pedestrian plan from city government. It will have to reallocate space from streets to sidewalks and figure out how to prioritize essential traffic over discretionary car trips that do not need to be in vicinity of what is already the U.S.' busiest train station. ❖

Review Says NYSDOT Bruckner-Sheridan Analysis is Junk Science

A consultant retained by advocates of demapping the Sheridan Expressway has found numerous errors in modeling work undertaken by the NY State DOT for its Bruckner-Sheridan Interchange project, and argues that "it is impossible to conclude from the Bruckner-Sheridan EIS modeling whether any future build alternative offers any traffic advantages over any other alternative."

The review by the firm Smart Mobility took a detailed look at methods and data state officials and consultants used to reach their recent argument that a big interchange upgrade is preferable to eliminating the Sheridan Expressway altogether.

Smart Mobility detailed the following problems:

Errors in key inputs: Smart Mobility identified errors of fact in several inputs for the "no build" and "1A (Sheridan elimination)" scenarios which increased travel delay findings and biased findings against them. Three involved Bronx highway ramps whose capacities were entered at significantly lower values than they are rated for. A fourth saw Tinton Avenue **coded one-way in the wrong direction** and with the wrong capacity. Smart Mobility executed the project model after correcting the errors and found all scenarios yielded traffic delay results within one percent of one another.

Unable to replicate observed traffic counts: After development of inputs and interrelationships, models are generally "validated" by comparing actual traffic counts to model-generated outputs. In the Bruckner-Sheridan case, the study team attempted to replicate 2003 truck counts in the model. However, Smart Mobility found "large discrepancies" for individual roadway segments, including many where modeled truck volumes **diverged 30%, 40% or more from observed counts**. Modeled northbound truck volumes on the Sheridan Expressway were about 50% higher than in actual counts, while vans were 174% too high. The model overestimated total traffic on all four Sheridan ramps, ranging from 22.9% to 110.9%.

The model's extensive mis-assignment of traffic volumes to routes within the area studied significantly affected results regarding travel times. Smart

Mobility notes that “If the model could not be manipulated to match observed truck volumes for 2003, the **level of uncertainty** concerning future truck volumes on different roadways is **very high.**”

Far-fetched assumptions as basis: The state’s model assumes overall growth on the highway system in The Bronx that the system **cannot plausibly accommodate**. Smart Mobility showed that volumes on highways at capacity, in contrast, level off, with historical data showing that vehicle volumes on the Hamilton Bridge peaked in 1990 and have held steady since. Nonetheless, the Bruckner-Sheridan model forecasts a **13% increase** in Hamilton Bridge traffic volume (and 11.3% growth in total vehicle miles of travel across the entire Bronx) from 2003 to 2030.

Smart Mobility notes the assumption of high overall traffic growth in The Bronx exaggerates future congestion, and therefore “likely exaggerates the differences in future vehicle hours of travel” between the studied alternatives. “In comparison with this increase, the less than 1.0 percent modeled differences between alternatives...is very small.”

Model used is a throwback: The state’s model is poorly suited to analyze the project it was applied to. Smart Mobility notes that “transportation modeling is a highly useful tool in urban planning. However, the way that it has been used in the B-S EIS work is ineffective. Regional models are simply **not accurate enough to quantify the small differences** between similar alternatives in 2030.”

Smart Mobility faults NYSDOT for “highlighting small percentage differences (between scenarios) **without discussing the uncertainty** in the numbers...” noting that doing so “implies a level of accuracy that is unattainable in modeling...models are never accurate for all roadway links – even for the base year where efforts can be focused on improving the model fit. For future years, the magnitude of error for individual roadway links is very high.”

Additionally, the **fixed traffic volume** scenario used for modeling all of the Bruckner-Sheridan alternatives does not allow for different overall traffic outcomes from project alternatives, which Smart Mobility calls “a throwback to earlier discredited modeling methods.” Advanced models allow for different travel behavior in response to different types of projects — “alternatives with more transportation capacity will generally result in more traffic, which partially offsets any benefits of the added capacity. These effects are captured in models by

feeding back congested travel times to travel demand. By using the same trip table for all alternatives, the feedback process [in the NYS DOT Bruckner-Sheridan project] ..is eliminated. This violates accepted modeling practice.”

The report will be released shortly and has been shared by the SBRWA with NYSDOT officials.

The Bruckner-Sheridan project has been debated in the South Bronx for some time. While state transportation officials have generally advocated for a beefed up highway interchange, the groups making up the SBRWA have argued for the actual elimination of the little-used, 1.2 mile Sheridan Expressway, pointing out that its removal would improve traffic conditions on the Bruckner and Cross-Bronx Expressways. Additionally, 28 acres of land along the Bronx River would be freed for higher-value uses, such as new housing, park-land and retail businesses (see www.southbronxvision.org).

The state was open-minded enough to include two versions of the Sheridan-elimination scenario for review in its recent analysis for the project, along with two versions of a rebuilt elevated highway interchange. It is trying to narrow down its options for a detailed EIS. But state officials have recently held meetings around the South Bronx to **argue** that their studies find **against de-mapping the Sheridan Expressway** and in favor of the interchange reconstruction plan because of traffic impacts. ❖

CT Faces Familiar Transit Expansion Woe

Governor Rell and the state legislature have increased the state’s mass transit capital spending commitments significantly over the past two years, but do not seem to have come to terms with the fact that expanding mass transit service also requires **larger operating budgets too**. New Jersey, facing its third fare increase in five years this spring (see *MTR #552*), has also made a mess of the capital-operating spending relationship as transit ridership has grown (in New York, where the MTA is expected to see a financial crisis over the next 12 months, the situation is more complex and stems mainly from loading the operating budget with debt for capital investments).

The problem in CT is made apparent in the recent calls by transit advocates for more bus service, though the issue will affect the state’s ambitions to expand rail as well. Environmentalists, business leaders and transportation officials, under the banner of **Transit for Connecticut**, have concluded after study that Connecticut’s bus systems could see an 81% increase in ridership over 5 years with adequate funding for operations. The coalition includes 22 groups, including CT Fund for the Environment, Business Council of Fairfield County, Citizens

The Tri-State Transportation Campaign web site:

www.tstc.org

Transportation Lobby, Regional Plan Association, and The WorkPlace Inc.

The group's report, by Urbitran, highlights economic and equity advantages and issues of providing adequate bus service. A recent survey by The WorkPlace, Inc., southwestern CT's workforce development board, found that 41% of respondents would not be able to maintain employment without existing bus service. Studies by the CT Department of Labor found that 68% of participants in a job training program cited **transportation as the most significant barrier to entry-level jobs**.

To help improve service for existing riders and attract new people to the buses, the Transit for Connecticut plan calls for a \$13 million increase in operating funds in year one, increasing incrementally to \$63 million in additional operating funds in five years. Total capital needs for buses are estimated at \$215 million over the 5 year period. State leaders should take the group's recommendations seriously.

House Speaker James Amann already is. He has sponsored legislation (Committee Bill 6366) that includes the \$12 million for improved bus service this year. The bill has other worthy provisions as well, including \$20 million for a transit-oriented development planning program, funding for expansion of Shore Line East, and \$5 million for a Connecticut Bikeway program.

But Governor Rell's budget goes the other way on bus service. It includes a **fare hike** of 25 cents for a one-way bus fare (to \$1.50), starting October 1 and provides no additional bus operating funds.

In total, transit experts estimate Rell's budget proposal spells a \$13 million shortfall for bus needs next fiscal year, leaving aside the increases sought by Transit for Connecticut. The fare hike would plug a \$4.3 million deficit in fiscal 2008 (presumably created by normal increases in basic costs), and generate \$6.5 million in 2009. However, \$5 million that usually goes to senior transportation service, mainly buses, was cut from Rell's budget. And there is a \$3 million "virtual" shortfall represented by **25 new buses** that Governor Rell bought in 2005 that operators **cannot afford to put on the street** without more funding.

To make matters even more complicated, Senate President Donald Williams has proposed **free fares for seniors**. His initiative, if passed, would mean an even larger shortfall for bus (and rail) operators.

As Connecticut grapples with the details of fighting state-wide gridlock, it will clearly have to look at both sides of its transportation budgets. Like New Jersey, CT lacks any dedicated revenue streams for transit operating expenses (see table above right), so transit subsidies are at the mercy of biannual budget negotiations. They generally short-change existing needs and provide little room for additional service. ❖

Big Transit Systems Run on Dedicated Revenue

Transit Agency	Dedicated taxes		Total operating funds	% from dedicated Taxes
	State	Local		
MTA New York City Transit	\$858	\$179	\$4,796	21.6%
Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority	\$13	\$595	\$1,135	53.5%
Massachusetts Bay Transp. Authority	\$624	\$0	\$1,138	54.8%
SE Pennsylvania Transp. Authority	\$193	\$4	\$903	21.8%
Chicago Transit Authority	\$0	\$277	\$1,021	27.1%

All figures from 2005 Federal Transit Administration data, dollars in millions.

Web Exclusive! Parkway Widening EIS

Well into the Internet Age, there is little excuse for not posting public information online. When the information pertains to a project as large as **100 new lane-miles on the Garden State Parkway**, the distribution of documents to public stakeholders is all the more important. Despite this, the New Jersey Turnpike Authority (NJTA) has failed to take this simple step, despite a state mandate for public participation and transparency.

Months worth of Open Public Records Act (OPRA) requests and multiple hard copies later, the Tri-State Campaign has finally received an electronic copy of the latest project Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). **We have made the document available on our website: www.tstc.org.**

While it would have been useful to have such ease of access before the sole hearing on the project's permit applications, we hope that the on-line EIS will allow those without the time or patience to file information requests to learn more about the project (see also *MTR* #'s 542, 550, 552). ❖

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.



In the South Bronx, CSX Goes Green!

CSX is looking to secure federal funds to retrofit six diesel locomotives with fuel-efficient, lower emission engines. Four of the trains operate out of Oak Point Yard in the South Bronx and travel within Queens and the Bronx. The other two are in Croton Yard in Westchester County.

The \$8.2 million project will use \$6.6 million in federal CMAQ funding allocated by NYS DOT, with CSX paying for the remainder. CSX officials estimate that once the government funding is fully approved (hopefully October, 2007), the retrofits can be finished 6-10 months later.

According to CSX, the action will result in an 86% annual reduction in ozone precursors (gases such as nitrogen oxides that contribute to smog and asthma), a 76% annual reduction in diesel particulate matter (DPM), and a 25% reduction in fuel consumption and greenhouse gas emissions. The new engines will also be quieter. This is good news for South Bronx communities burdened with a disproportionate amount of pollution.

New EPA Guidelines for Cleaner Trains, Boats

CSX is a step ahead of industry standards, but new federal requirements may make cleaner trains and ships the norm. Earlier this month, the EPA proposed new regulations that will require ships and trains to adopt stringent pollution reduction standards as early as 2008. The tighter standards would be applied to new locomotive and marine diesel engines and on remanufactured engines. Eventually, by 2015 or so, all new locomotives and marine vessels would be required to further reduce emissions by using capable of fueling by new "ultra-ultra" low sulfur diesel, estimated to be available in 2012. By 2030, EPA says the regulations would cut nitrogen oxides by 80% and particulate matter by 90%. Similar measures for other heavy mobile sources (trucks, buses, construction vehicles) have been approved in the past decade and are in various stages of implementation.

The proposed rules were praised by the Natural Resources Defense Council and Environmental Defense. Public hearings will be held in May. For more information, see www.epa.gov/otaq/regs/nonroad/420f07015.htm

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



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CALENDAR

April 5, 11:45am. Transportation Research Forum's NY Chapter: "An overview of the MTA and Its Challenges" with Elliot Sander, MTA executive director. \$ 100 Washington Street, Manhattan. RSVP by April 3rd. 212-435-4226.

April 5, 5-7:30pm. "Talking Transportation": New Jersey Transportation Planning Authority public participation plan review. City Hall, 280 Grove Street, Jersey City . 973-639-8400.

April 10, 11, 12 - TransAction 2007: 31st Annual NJ State Transportation Conference & Expo. Tropicana Resort Hotel Casino & Conference Center, Atlantic City. www.njcost.com/transaction.htm.

April 11, 9am. NJ Transit board meeting. NJ Transit Headquarters, One Penn Plaza East, 9th Floor, Newark. njtboard@njtransit.com.

April 11, 6:30pm. Panel: "The Roads Taken and Not Taken: Robert Moses and Transportation." with Richard Ravitch, former MTA chair; Gene Russianoff, NYPIRG Straphangers Campaign; Elliot Sander, CEO, MTA; and Iris Weinsall, NYC DOT commissioner. Moderated by Robert Yaro, Regional Plan Association. Museum of the City of New York, 1220 Fifth Ave, Manhattan. \$. RSVP 212-534-1672, ext. 3395.

April 12, 12:15-2pm. LIRR Commuter's Council meeting. 347 Madison Avenue, 5th Floor Manhattan. 212-878-7087.

April 16, 6pm. Stamford Traffic Calming Master Plan Kickoff. Stamford Government Center, 888 Washington Boulevard, Stamford. 203-977-4237.

April 17, Noon-1pm. Presentation: "Promoting Safe Walking and Cycling to Improve Public Health: Lessons from Europe" with guest speaker Dr. John Pucher. NYMTC, 199 Water Street, 22nd Floor, Manhattan. 212-383-7200.

April 17, 6pm. Stamford Traffic Calming Master Plan charrette. Rogers Magnet School, 83 Lockwood Avenue, Stamford. 203-977-4237.

April 18, 6pm. Stamford Traffic Calming Master Plan charrette. Lathon Wider Community Center, 34 Woodland Avenue, Stamford. 203-977-4237.

April 19, 10am-9pm. NY State DOT Kosciuszko Bridge Project Public Hearing. Presentations at 11am and 6:30pm that summarize Draft EIS alternatives, followed by public testimony session. Polish National Home, 261 Driggs Ave, Brooklyn. 212-532-4175.

More calendar items at www.tstc.org