

# Mobilizing the Region

A Weekly Bulletin from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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## NEWS

### More Waiting at MTA Crossings

A quick look at MTA Bridges and Tunnels performance indicators shows that commuters are waiting longer at toll booths. **Median waiting time at toll facilities has increased 51%**, from 9.9 seconds to 15 seconds between the first quarter of 2006 and the first quarter of this year.

The increase is puzzling since traffic volumes increased but at a much slower rate. Bridge and tunnel traffic volume from January-June rose from 121.05 million crossings to 122.5 million, a 1% increase.

The numbers make the case that it's time for the MTA to start to update its toll facilities. While the Port Authority is implementing high speed tolls and studying cashless tolls (MTR # 558), the MTA continues to use barrier arms that require all vehicles to stop, even those equipped with E-Z Pass. High speed or non-stop tolls allow drivers to move through toll facilities at highway speeds, without slowing down, and cashless tolls use video technology to take photos of license plates for those cars without E-Z Pass. Cashless tolls are a sort of Holy Grail when it comes to toll technology; they speed commutes, improve safety, and improve air quality (cars emit the most pollution during acceleration and deceleration). NYC's congestion pricing program, should it be approved by the Traffic Mitigation Commission, will likely use cashless technology. For years, the MTA has given Tri-State and others the same couple of responses about why it can't modernize its toll system. (MTRs # 417, 462).

The MTA announced a proposal to raise fare and toll revenue by 6.5% in 2008 (see story, right). A small service improvement for customers could include eliminating the barriers, and promising to study cashless tolls.

The MTA is investigating the high speed and cashless toll technology as part of a two-way toll study on the Verrazano Bridge. However, the politics of eliminating the one-way toll could easily overwhelm any recommendations of that study. ❖

### MTA Fares: A Historical Perspective

Last week, the MTA proposed a 6.5% fare and toll increase in early 2008 to help pay off ballooning deficits. Even with a significant surplus this year, MTA officials make a strong case that the agency is indeed in financial crisis, with debt reaching \$1.8 billion by 2010, and needs an infusion of money.

MTA CEO Lee Sander promised that the plan is just that, and said he looked forward to "give and take with the public." No specific fare and toll structure was presented, and transit advocates will certainly be working in coming months for a plan that increases governmental subsidies, and attempts to reduce the proportion of transit system funding shouldered by transit riders. MTA documents state a plan will be worked out in the next two months with public hearing notice in September or October. The Straphangers Campaign's Gene Russianoff has called for a postponement of the hike until after a decision on NYC's congestion pricing proposal in March 2008, a request the State should heed.

But as the conversation ensues, it's worth recounting how we got ourselves into this situation in the first place. Below we offer a brief history lesson, from MTRs 112, 264, 275, 399 and others.

**Mid-late 1990s:** State and city cuts to transit lead to heavy fare hikes in 1995, a large portion of which is used to back bonds for capital investment in the system. Debt service on these bonds begins to escalate. The debt bomb image (right) appears.

**Late 1990s:** Fare innovations leads to more riders, but the MTA doesn't have funds to increase service.

**Winter-Spring 2000:** Transit advocates warn that the state's long term financial health is in jeopardy if the State approves the MTA's 2000-2004 Capital Plan, which relies heavily on borrowing because Governor Pataki and the State Legislature offer no direct state aid for the plan.

**Spring 2000:** At a special MTA Board hearing, Gene Russianoff urges MTA board members to reject the capital plan because of the debt-ridden financing scheme. Russianoff tells reporters that debt could "make it harder to build the Second Ave subway because you have to find another seven or eight or nine billion for it in the next 10 or 15 years." The State Legislature approves a slightly modified capital



The Tri-State Transportation Campaign web site:

[www.tstc.org](http://www.tstc.org)

plan that includes a commitment to the full 2nd Ave subway, but still relies heavily on debt and makes future fare hikes likely.

**Summer 2000:** At MTA hearings, transit advocates lay **blame on Governor Pataki and the State legislature**, citing NY State funding dropped from 19% in the first two MTA capital programs to 9% in 2000.

**March 2003:** Single ride fares jump 33% from \$1.50 to \$2 to raise an anticipated \$350M a year.

**Summer 2003:** Mayor Bloomberg cuts \$90M in city aid to MTA capital program. This reduces city transit aid to its lowest level in at least 25 years. The MTA benefits from \$350M additional real estate revenue; puts \$200M into reserve for 2006 operating budget. Still, the MTA anticipates huge future debt.

**Fall 2004:** Transit advocates state that the \$2 fare may not last beyond 2004 due to escalating MTA debt related costs.

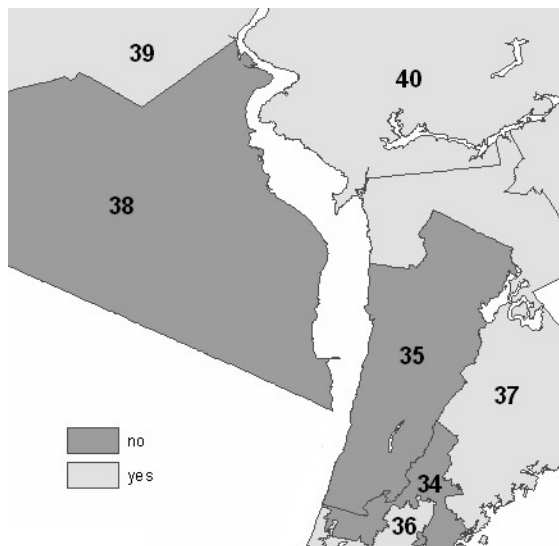
**February 2005** The MTA raises 7-day and 30-day unlimited-ride MetroCards. This is only 18 months after a 50-cent hike in the base fare.

**Fall 2006:** MTA Chair Peter Kalikow says MTA Board is opposed to fare hike and service cuts despite anticipated \$905M deficit in 2008. IBO notes that a recently issued MTA proposal to discontinue service on 95 late night subway runs yields negligible savings. Real estate taxes continue to cushion deficit.

**Spring 2007:** MTA anticipates surplus of \$270M which can be used to offset \$1B projected deficit in 2008. The agency says that debt service for its capital borrowing is claiming \$1.4B of a \$9.8B budget.

**July 2007:** MTA CEO Lee Sander unveils a proposed budget plan for 2009-2013 with a 6.5% fare and toll hike. Documents show debt service burden increasing 82% between 2004 and 2008. Potentially concerning aspects of the plan include automatic fare hikes starting in 2010. ❖

### Hudson Valley Votes on Congestion Pricing Bill, NYS Senate



### NYC Pricing Moves Forward; Enclaves of Opposition Remain

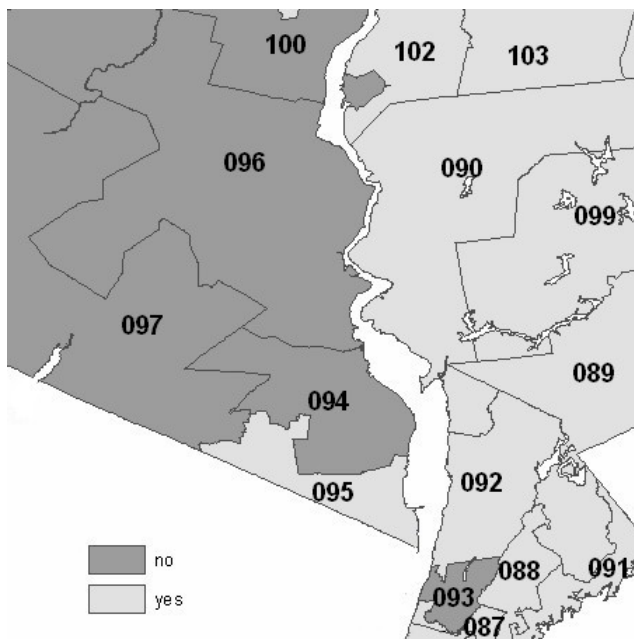
The NYS State Legislature approved a compromise congestion mitigation bill two weeks ago, which creates a 17 member panel to study congestion relief strategies for NYC. A final recommendation will not be released until March 2008, but the requirement that the recommended plan reduce vehicle-miles traveled by 6.3% bodes well for approval of some sort of congestion pricing program, since market based systems have proven the most effective means of mitigating traffic.

Much gratitude goes out to the 122 members of the New York State Assembly and the 39 New York State Senators who passed the bill.

Some of those voting against the commission overwhelmingly represent districts with either a very small percentage of Manhattan commuters, or very low car ownership rates. For example, **Rockland County** leaders were largely against the proposal, even though only 4% of Rockland residents drive to Manhattan for work, and congestion pricing revenue would help fund the ARC passenger rail tunnel under the Hudson, providing them with one seat rides into Manhattan. **Congratulations to Assemblymember Ellen Jaffee (95th district)** for staying true to her environmentally focused record and being the only Rockland legislator to vote in favor of the bill.

For the next few editions, we will show maps with elected leaders' votes on the congestion mitigation bill # A09362, along with some relevant statistics. The information will also be available on our website. [www.tstc.org](http://www.tstc.org). ❖

### Hudson Valley Votes on Congestion Pricing Bill, NYS Assembly



## ConnDOT Reform: "The Right Road"

In a multi-page spread published last month, the *Hartford Courant* echoed the Campaign's long-standing call for ConnDOT reform. Citing data from recent Campaign reports and including quotes from TSTC staff, "The Right Road" is a comprehensive rebuke of the agency. The piece calls for a reformed DOT that embraces transit oriented development, fix it first, and bicycling and walking.

The *Courant* identifies five failures that have led ConnDOT to become "a sluggish, uncertain and often inept bureaucracy." Those are: (1) a diminished sense of mission as the agency born in the highway era has nearly completed the state's Interstate network; (2) a bureaucracy bleeding staff, particularly senior staff, and afraid to try new approaches; (3) failure to innovate in response to new problems and needs such as expanded transit service; (4) a strategic planning process that is spoiled by political interference; and, (5) historically, a lack of leadership from the Governor's office.

Turning the DOT around will require the agency to **adopt a new vision**, similar to New Jersey DOT, in which transportation is "tied to land use, economic development and housing policy, all integrated into a meaningful state plan of development," wrote the *Courant*. Specifically, ConnDOT should commit as much money to mass transit as it does to highways (the Campaign's analysis shows the state is moving in the right direction, but still has a long way to go in this regard, see MTR #557), and work with municipalities to spur development around transit stops. The *Courant* also calls on the DOT to prioritize existing infrastructure over expanding highways (a case made even stronger by the recent Minneapolis bridge collapse), and design roads that can accommodate bicyclists and pedestrians.

### Strong Calls for Public Input

The *Courant* piece credits Governor Rell with starting the process of ConnDOT reform, but notes that the recent task force she created to manage the job is heavy on business and government types and **short on transportation reform** experts (MTR #560). The Campaign strongly agrees, and sent a letter to the ConnDOT Reform Commission last month, urging them to **invite the public to participate** in this important process, and offering assistance to bring ConnDOT into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Perhaps the Commission is listening. Last week, a website was created, with an email form for public comments. The next meeting of the Commission is Thursday, August 8th, and public comments will be heard. See <http://www.ct.gov/dot/site/default.asp>. The Campaign hopes public comments will be given serious consideration, and advocates will be involved in the process in a meaningful way. ❖

## Ridership Up in CT

Connecticut's buses and rail lines continue to see significant growth according to newly released ridership figures for May. Ridership jumped 8 percent on intrastate New Haven Rail Line trips and 4 percent on CTTransit buses operating in the state's urban centers in May 2007 compared to May 2006. New Haven Line ridership into Manhattan also grew, by 4.2 percent, as did Stamford bus ridership which soared 9 percent over May 2006 levels.

Governor Rell announced the ridership figures last week, saying, "growth in state and regional job markets, and consistent high fuel costs continue to provide the incentive for the public to use mass transit. This is only the beginning for our state on its expansion of mass transportation." ❖

## Bee-Line Boost: Metrocard Pays

A regional transit partnership is thriving in Westchester County, whose Bee-Line bus system is on pace for its largest annual ridership increase in 23 years thanks to the system's April 1 adoption of the **Metrocard** for fare payment, allowing riders free transfers between Bee-Line and MTA subways and buses (see MTR # 543). Ridership on the system in May was 400,000 higher than in April, and a 6.3% ridership increase over 2006 is projected for 2007, according to an article in the *Journal-News*.

Over the years we have repeatedly cited the example of Long Island Bus, which has seen nonstop ridership growth since it began accepting Metrocard in 1998 (see MTR # 137). There is every reason to believe that the Bee-Line system will see similar gains. ❖

## NJ Turnpike Authority: Behold the Digital Revolution

In MTR # 560, we reported that, after months of requests from advocates, the New Jersey Turnpike Authority had finally put documents online about the Garden State Parkway widening project .

While surfing its website, Tri-State Transportation Campaign staff were therefore surprised to find environmental documents for the widening of the New Jersey Turnpike, which would add another lane in each direction from Exits 6 to 9. (<http://www.njturnpikewidening.com/>).

Apparently, NJTA has learned a lesson about public access to information after receiving harsh criticism from advocates about secretive procedures surrounding the Parkway Widening documents. TSTC had to file official freedom of information requests in order to receive public documents. Now, even before hearing dates are announced, the public can read about the Turnpike Widening by going online. ❖

## Editor's Note

Dear *MTR* Readers:

I am very pleased to report that on July 23<sup>rd</sup>, after a formal search, the TSTC Board of Directors approved me as executive director. Former executive director Jon Orcutt left TSTC in June to serve as Senior Policy Advisor to NYC DOT Commissioner Janette Sadik-Khan, and I have been acting executive director since.

As many of you know, I have been associate director for four years at Tri-State and an *MTR* co-editor for five, so I feel well positioned to lead the organization. And I am fortunate to take the reins when awareness about sustainability, government reform, and global warming is stronger than ever.

Mine is not the only change at TSTC. We are pleased to welcome **Veronica Vanterpool** as our new Policy Advocate. Her main task will be to build support for Mayor Bloomberg's congestion pricing and PlaNYC effort. Allies working in the Campaign for New York's Future already know her well.

**Damien Newton**, our NJ Coordinator, is leaving TSTC in mid-August to pursue similar work in California. We are very sad to see Damien go after his three years here, but feel lucky to have found **Zoe Baldwin**, a cyclist and NJ native who has worked in politics for a number of years, as his replacement.

NYC Coordinator **Teresa Toro** recently left the Campaign to pursue other interests, but we're sure she will continue to serve Williamsburg residents well as Transportation Chair of Brooklyn Community Board #1.

Finally, we have hired **Steven Higashide**, TSTC's intern since January, as Communications Associate. Steven will be writing for *MTR* and updating our web presence.

Which gets me to my last, and perhaps most important, announcement. In our effort to stay modern, effective, technologically savvy, and generally hip, we will be **transforming *MTR* into a blog** over the next few months. We will still send weekly emails, but they will be a collection of blog highlights rather than a formal bulletin. In an effort to reduce waste, we will be asking those who receive *MTR* as a fax to check our blog and sign up for email alerts, with a goal of ending the fax edition altogether. We hope we don't get too much hatemail.

Enjoy this edition of *MTR* and the rest of the summer.

Kate Slevin  
Executive Director

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## CALENDAR

**August 9**, 10am, ConnDOT Reform Committee meeting. LOB, [www.ct.gov/dot/](http://www.ct.gov/dot/).

**August 16**, 4:30-6:30pm. Metro-North Railroad Commuter Council meeting. MTA Headquarters, 347 Madison Avenue, 5th Floor Board Room, Manhattan. 212-878-7087.

**August 23**, Noon-2pm. New York City Transit Rider's Council meeting. MTA Headquarters, 347 Madison Avenue, 5th Floor Board Room, Manhattan. 212-878-7087.

**August 28**, 6-8pm. Auto-Free New York invites you to "Ride Downtown Newark's New Light Rail Line" as a way to imagine how light rail might work in New York City. Meet at the main waiting room at Newark Penn Station. 212-475-3394.

**September 8**, 9am-2pm. Discover Hartford Bicycling and Walking Tour: A day to explore and learn about Hartford's historic past and promising future. Choose between a 2-hour walking tour and 10- and 25-mile bicycling tours of Hartford's historic and modern landmarks. Hosted by the Central Connecticut Bicycle Alliance and the Antiquarian and Landmarks Society. Click here to register online.

**September 27**, Noon-2pm. New York City Transit Rider's Council meeting. MTA Headquarters, 347 Madison Avenue, 5th Floor Board Room, Manhattan. 212-878-7087.

**October 9**, 8am. Connecticut Transportation Strategy Board meeting. Location TBA.

**October 11**, 12:15-2pm. Long Island Rail Road Commuter's Council meeting. MTA Headquarters, 347 Madison Avenue, 5th Floor Board Room, Manhattan. 212-878-7087.

**October 24**, 6pm, **Save the Date!** TSTC's Annual New York Gala. Guest speaker: NYC DOT Commissioner Janette Sadik-Khan. Honored Guest: Jon Orcutt.

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

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



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