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TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



Testimony  
of

**The Tri-State Transportation Campaign  
&  
The New York Transportation Equity Alliance**

At the Hearing of the  
Joint Legislative Budget Committee,  
2012-13 Executive Budget, Transportation

Thursday, January 24, 2011

Thank you, Chairman Fuschillo and Chairman Gantt, for providing this opportunity to testify today. And a double thank you, to you and the entire legislature, for leading the charge and passing the Complete Streets bill last year.

My name is Nadine Lemmon, and I am the Albany Legislative Advocate for Tri-State Transportation Campaign. I am testifying today on behalf of Tri-State, who you know, and The New York State Transportation Equity Alliance, or NYSTEA—a coalition of over 75 groups statewide working to reform federal and state transportation policy to make it more equitable for all New Yorkers.

I would like to address two major issues in the budget: the impact of this budget on transit systems statewide and the need for transit on the Tappan Zee Bridge.

### **Transit Funding**

We support Governor Cuomo's proposed funding for transit systems. Unlike the previous budgets, this one includes no sweeps or cuts, and because of increased revenues from dedicated transportation taxes, there is a healthy increase in funding for operations. It also fulfills the promise of making the MTA whole for the gap caused by the legislature's partial repeal of the MTA payroll tax through 2014—and we hope that you will uphold that promise as well, not only for the remaining few years of this capital program but in perpetuity.

As you may know, upstate transit systems are struggling. This past fall, Buffalo's Niagara-Frontier Transportation Authority was grappling with a \$15 million budget gap, and they were poised to cut their service miles drastically—by 22%. Because of Governor Cuomo's proposed budget, and because of a united outcry from transit riders, they are now considering less severe cuts. Buffalo is not alone in this struggle—in Albany, before the release of the Governor's budget, Capital District Transportation Authority was also facing a \$10 million dollar budget deficit, and that was after substantial efforts to consolidate the system.

This proposed budget does not fix all of the problems. Amidst this recession, New York's transit systems have faced increased ridership, increased expenses, and decreased funding from Albany. Transit operators have raised fares, cut service, diverted federal capital dollars, and depleted reserve funds in order to make up for the shortfall in State Transit Operating Assistance (STOA) distributions.

This puts tremendous pressure on transit riders. When operators defer much-needed capital investments in new bus systems, and bus and rail facilities, riders suffer with longer commutes, dirtier air, and less reliable service. On top of fare hikes and service cuts, commuters were recently hit with an additional tax hike because Congress let the commuter tax benefit expire. Hits to transit disproportionately affects those who can least afford it—low income communities, communities of color, aging communities, and those who are simply trying to get to

work.

Dollars coming from Albany support over 130 transit systems across the state, and account for about 35% of their operating revenues. These systems, and their riders, need steadier and more reliable revenue streams—they can't come with their tin cup to Albany every year. We support Governor Cuomo's proposal to redistribute the Long Lines Tax statewide, and we doubly support MTA Chairman Joe Lhota's recent call for more revenues for transit. New Yorkers are depending on you for their ride in the morning, and that ride won't come if there isn't enough money in the pot.

### **Transit on the Tappan Zee Bridge**

We agree with Governor Cuomo that the Tappan Zee Bridge must be replaced, but to do so without making Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) fully operational the day the bridge opens will substantially hinder the region's ability to meet commuter's transportation needs, now and in the future. While the Commissioner has stated that the new bridge will not preclude transit, if it is not built now, it is not likely to be built, ever.

New York is a home rule state. I spent 8 years as a Town Board member in the Hudson Valley, and I lived and breathed home rule. In the Hudson Valley, we take the responsibility of home rule seriously, and we're proud to live in a state sees the value of listening to local leaders. After 280 public meetings and nearly 10 years of study, a regional consensus developed that transit must be part of any bridge replacement. Rail is too expensive, but BRT would cost less than \$1 billion to build. Any attempt to override the near unanimous community support for transit challenges the spirit of home rule, and the philosophy of governance in this state.

The recently-released DEIS suggests that the bridge replacement will have no negative air quality impact. We regard this projection with skepticism, since previous environmental documents have said that public transportation was necessary to address congestion and pollution in the Hudson Valley. The document also claims that the new bridge is in compliance with New York's Smart Growth Public Infrastructure Policy Act, a piece of legislation that requires infrastructure projects to incorporate sustainability measures and plan for the future. In particular, projects must "encourage and allow for greater public transportation options with the goal of reducing automobile usage." In the case of the Tappan Zee Bridge, this requirement is unmet.

This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to reduce traffic and greenhouse gas emissions and create a transit backbone for future economic development in the Hudson Valley—now is not the time to waste taxpayer dollars on a bridge-widening project that will leave commuters stuck in traffic. Demand for transit is high—

Metro-North railroad posted its 2<sup>nd</sup> highest annual total, and has surpassed the Long Island Railroad. BRT on the bridge is an issue that strikes at the very core of transportation equity—by excluding transit from the bridge, New York will be excluding many Hudson Valley residents from full participation in their local economy.