



Testimony of Ryan Lynch, Policy Director, TSTC
"Struggling on Long Island: Meeting the Challenges of Poverty on Long Island"
Suffolk County Legislature

My name is Ryan Lynch, and I am the policy director for the Tri-State Transportation Campaign, a non-profit transportation policy organization dedicated to creating a more balanced, environmentally friendly and equitable transportation system in New York, New Jersey and Connecticut. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

Access to transportation is an integral component of daily life on Long Island and especially in Suffolk County. Efficient transportation, and in particular an efficient, affordable and convenient transit system, is imperative for job access and economic growth in the County, especially for those living on limited incomes.

However, Suffolk County's transportation system does not work for everyone. While Suffolk County residents are well served by automobile transportation infrastructure, according to the United States Census, almost 6% of Suffolk County households do not have access to an automobile.

These households overwhelmingly earn much less than those that do. On average, households without access to an automobile in Suffolk County earn \$34,529 a year, or roughly \$50,000 less than households with automobiles. Automobile ownership is expensive. According to the American Public Transportation Association, owning an automobile in New York costs approximately \$1,200 more a month or almost \$15,000 more a year, than riding public transit.

And while the Long Island Rail Road provides substantial service for east-west connections, in many instances the LIRR is too expensive for some of Suffolk County's most vulnerable residents to use. For example, a monthly LIRR pass from stations in Suffolk County commuting to New York City range from \$299 a month in Babylon to \$429 in Montauk.

One of the cheapest ways to get around in Suffolk County is on Suffolk County Transit. Yet even bus fares just got more expensive. On May 1st of this year, Suffolk County Transit enacted a 33% bus fare increase in one fell swoop. While this is the first fare increase in approximately two decades, Tri-State urged the Suffolk County Legislature and County Executive Steve Bellone to phase the increase in over three years. Doing so would have reduced the economic impact on Suffolk County Transit riders and on Suffolk's broader economy.

This would have been important because Suffolk County Transit riders earn \$20,000 less, on average, than motorists who drive to work alone. This recent increase in fares will end up costing round-trip

weekday bus riders about \$100 more in 2012. This is a de facto tax increase for those who can least afford it and less money in their pockets to contribute to their local businesses and economy.

If the recent trend of higher gas prices continues, more and more families and individuals on the economic margin will turn to transit to help mitigate increasing costs. Earlier this year, it was reported that Long Island had some of the highest gas prices in the country. As a result, January and February ridership was up by over 25,000 trips as compared to the same time period in 2011. This jump in ridership is not simply an isolated example of increased pressure on the transit system in the face of high gas prices. The last time gas prices spiked in 2008, ridership on Suffolk County Transit grew 8%, according to the National Transit Database. To date, annual ridership exceeds 6.5 million riders, is higher than pre-recession ridership and 42% higher than ridership in 2000.

While this increase in ridership assists in covering operating costs of the transit system, the increased ridership also increases the cost to and strain on the system. While Suffolk County has supported its bus system relatively well over the years, more must be done to improve the Suffolk County Transit system to accommodate its customers. Many of working poor do not abide by a 'normal' nine to five, Monday through Friday, work schedule, which is why the lack of Sunday service along the majority of the Suffolk County Transit system is a hindrance to economic empowerment and economic growth in the County and the region. Finding the revenues necessary to expand the bus system cannot solely fall on the backs of transit riders, however. Increased state support is needed to complement the county's efforts to grow its bus system. While \$1.4 million more was included in the recently adopted New York State budget for Suffolk County Transit, this still represents approximately \$630,000 less funding than the County received in 2008-2009. Suffolk County's state elected officials must do more to support transit riders in their districts.

In addition, Suffolk County Accessible Transportation (SCAT) serves approximately 500,000 trips a year, many of whom, including Suffolk County's aging population, live on fixed incomes. In County Executive Bellone's recent budget mitigation proposal, a fare increase of \$1.00 is planned for one-way SCAT trips. This fare increase would make SCAT fares the highest on Long Island and higher than fares in New York City. If these fare increases were to go into effect, a daily, roundtrip, weekday rider on SCAT would have to pay an additional \$522 a year for the same level of service.

Poor support for transit is not the only way that low income communities are impacted by inadequate transportation facilities. For those that do not have access to an automobile and/or transit service the failure to invest in simple things like pedestrian safety infrastructure or safe cycling options puts Suffolk County's working poor at increased risk for injury or death.

Suffolk County is home to some of the most dangerous roads for walking and cycling in the region. According to our annual *Most Dangerous Roads for Walking* report, 96 pedestrians were killed from 2008-2010 along roads in Suffolk County. In addition, an investigation by *Newsday* last year found that 43 cyclists were killed in Suffolk County from 2005-2010. This latter analysis found that the bicyclist fatality rate in Suffolk County is nearly double the rate in all of New York State. These pedestrian and cyclist fatalities occur predominantly on arterial roads, or roads that are very wide and are designed to move cars as fast as possible through downtowns and Main Streets. In most instances, these roads have very little pedestrian or cycling infrastructure, like high visibility crosswalks, sidewalks, protected bicycle lanes and pedestrian safety islands, that help protect these users of the road and calm traffic.

Unfortunately, low-income communities are disproportionately impacted by these types of fatalities and injuries.

In the *Newsday* report, the Reverend Allan Ramirez of the Brookville Reformed Church indicated that fatalities are particularly high among Latinos and low income workers because of the lack of access to driver's licenses and the "need to get to work either by bicycle or on foot since public transportation is inadequate."

A 2011 report by Transportation for America, a broad national coalition focused on improving the country's transportation policy, of which Tri-State is a member, bears this statement out. The report, *Dangerous by Design*, found that America's poor pedestrian infrastructure disproportionately impacts low-income households and communities of color. According to the report, the pedestrian fatality rate is approximately 2.91 per 100,000 persons in the 234 counties where more than 20% of households have incomes below the poverty line. This rate is substantially greater than the national average of 1.6 deaths per 100,000 persons.

Seniors in our communities, often living on fixed incomes, are also disproportionately represented in fatality statistics. People aged 60 years and older comprise 23.4% of Suffolk County's 94 pedestrians killed in the three years from 2007 through 2009, though they make up only 18.5% of the population. Those seniors 75 years and older accounted for only 6.1% of the total population, but made up 11.7% of pedestrian fatalities during the same time period.

In Suffolk County, bicycle and pedestrian fatalities make up more than 25% of total traffic fatalities, yet the New York State Department of Transportation dedicates very little transportation funding to promoting pedestrian and cycling infrastructure. According to a Tri-State analysis of the New York State Transportation Improvement Program, a blueprint of funding priorities throughout the state, only 2% of New York State's proposed funding from 2010-2014 is dedicated to bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure.

While the state recently adopted a 'Complete Streets' Law—legislation that requires all road projects receiving state and federal funds to consider the needs of everyone who uses the roads, including pedestrians and cyclists—many of these fatalities and injuries occur on roads that are not funded by the state and federal government. This loophole in the legislation is why Tri-State has actively encouraged local municipalities to adopt local complete streets policies. The Towns of Babylon, Brookhaven, Islip and Southampton have all adopted these policies in Suffolk County and the Towns of Hempstead and North Hempstead have adopted policies in Nassau County.

The adoption of a similar, county-wide Complete Streets policy that formalizes and institutionalizes existing efforts at the Suffolk County Department of Public Works, will help expand safe transportation options for low income workers and all Suffolk County residents. While safety of residents is penultimate, Complete Streets also save money. Transportation is the second largest expense in household budgets. Designing and building streets that provide for greater transportation choice and safe and free forms of transportation, like cycling and walking, saves low income households money.

Even in a time of austerity, investment in safe transportation infrastructure is imperative. Greater funding for Suffolk County's transit system and safe pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure is integral to creating an environment conducive to economic empowerment and growth in the County and the region.