

# TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



## **Testimony of Jenna Chernetz, NJ Advocate at Tri-State Transportation Campaign Assembly Budget Committee – FY2014 State Budget William Paterson University, Wayne, NJ March 19, 2013**

Good afternoon Chairman Prieto, Vice Chair Schaer and members of the Assembly Budget Committee.

My name is Jenna Chernetz and I am the New Jersey Advocate for the Tri-State Transportation Campaign, a non-profit policy watchdog organization working for a more balanced, environmentally friendly and equitable transportation system in New Jersey, New York and Connecticut.

This is the third year in a row that I have testified before this committee regarding the state budget and each year I have not had the ability to review the NJDOT Capital Program before preparing my testimony. The funding levels of the NJDOT tell only half the story. The other half, the most important half, is how NJDOT plans to spend those dollars. And that information is contained in the NJDOT Capital Program. With state revenues failing short of expectations once again, it is growing ever more important that these scarce state dollars be spent wisely and in a sustainable manner. **We urge the Assembly to require NJDOT to make these documents available in time for budget hearings so that taxpayers know how the state is investing our funds in transportation.**

Beyond transparency, there are several areas that must be addressed in this year's budget with respect to transportation.

**(1) Identify new and sustainable revenue sources for transportation** Tri-State applauds Senator Whelan's efforts for proposing revenue ideas for funding the Transportation Trust Fund "TTF" and proposing a solution that does not rely on more debt. However, any new revenues must be additive, and not serve simply as a replacement source of funding. New Jersey's gas tax is the third lowest in the United States, hasn't been raised since 1988 and is inadequate to address the State's transportation investment needs. It generates roughly \$522 million in dedicated annual revenue for NJ's roads, bridges and transit, all of which goes to pay off debt. In fact, all of New Jersey' transportation revenues are going to pay off past transportation-related debt. Last year, total appropriated revenues for the TTF were \$956.7 million but total TTF/NJTransit debt service was \$991.1 million.

New Jersey is currently relying on creative debt and one-shot revenues to fund transportation. Keeping up the illusion of a healthy and robust transportation capital funding plan has required the creation of transportation "Frankenfunding" schemes which include: using money previously dedicated to the Access to the Region's Core "ARC" project, one-shot funding from PANYNJ for specific projects, and more debt. These funding sources are unsustainable and New Jersey must get serious about addressing its ongoing transportation funding crisis.

**(2) Target investments to existing roads and bridges and refocus the NJDOT on its Fix-it-First Policy** According to a report from T4 America, over 10 million drivers cross structurally deficient bridges in New Jersey every day. In 2010, NJDOT released a report showing that half of New Jersey's roads were deficient. Tri-State's annual analysis of the NJDOT Capital Program shows that NJDOT is slipping away from its fix-it-first policy and spending more on new road capacity. In 2009, road widening was only 3.6% of the capital program but jumped significantly in 2013 to 13.96%. Such spending

trends threaten to undermine the state's "fix-it-first" goals and takes away dollars which could be spent on maintaining existing road and bridge infrastructure. New Jersey must focus on maintaining existing roads and bridges, while also making them more resilient in extreme weather events like Superstorm Sandy. A prime example of what happens when existing infrastructure is neglected is the Pulaski Skyway. In order to complete the necessary repairs in an expedited fashion, the NJDOT is proposing to close the Skyway in one direction for 2 years. At a recent hearing in Union City, testimony was provided by local leaders and residents who expressed concern about the impacts of the closing to the regional economy and the area's quality of life.

**(3) Provide Adequate Funding for NJTransit.** According to NJ Transit, ridership trends during the first quarter of Fiscal Year 2013 (July-September 2012) averaged 22.2 million monthly passenger trips, which is a two year high. This represents a 4.5 percent increase over the same time period last year and average weekday and weekend passenger trips were both at their second-highest first quarter levels ever. Weekend passenger trips saw the most substantial increase when compared to the same period last year with Sundays having the biggest increase at 14.7 percent (9.9 percent increase on Saturdays). Ridership now exceeds levels attained prior to the May 2010 fare change, and is only about 3 percent below its pre-recession all-time high. Ridership on NJTransit buses also saw increased ridership of 4 percent during the first quarter of FY2013 and a 16.3 percent ridership gain on Sundays over the same period last year. Ridership is expected increase again this year according to projections in the proposed FY2014 Budget (page D-361).

Unfortunately, a dearth of funding has made it harder and harder for NJTransit to accommodate these ridership gains. NJT's operating expenses outpace operating revenues forcing the agency to transfer dollars from its capital budget to meet its operating needs. This is an unsustainable funding scheme that makes it difficult for NJ Transit to plan for the years of growth ahead. Legislators must find new funding solutions to help ensure NJ Transit can keep pace with the rising demand.

**(4) Increase funding for programs that reduce pedestrian and bicycle fatalities statewide.** Last month, Tri-State released its annual report on the Most Dangerous Roads in the region. For the fifth year in a row, Route 130 (Burlington Pike) was the most deadly road for pedestrians; 9 pedestrians were killed on it from 2009 through 2011. US-322/40 (Blackhorse Pike) in Atlantic County and Route 1 in Middlesex County also had nine pedestrian fatalities each during this period. In total, our analysis found that 440 pedestrians were killed on New Jersey's roadways during the study period.

New Jersey's roads are equally treacherous for bicyclists in New Jersey. According to analyses conducted by Tri-State, over 27,000 bicycle-vehicle crashes took place in New Jersey from 2001-2011 with 141 bicycle fatalities.

These are preventable deaths.

Repair and reconstruction of roads and bridges damaged by Sandy provides an excellent opportunity to include pedestrian and bicycle amenities. The rehabilitation of these damaged facilities should be seen as an opportunity to make New Jersey's roads and bridges safer for pedestrians and bicyclists by adding Complete Streets amenities like sidewalks and bike lanes.

The state must do even more to fund programs that pay for pedestrian safety initiatives, especially since MAP-21, the federal transportation bill passed last year, cuts dedicated federal funding for bicycle and pedestrian projects by 33%. New Jersey will have to do more to ensure that this decrease in funding does not hinder the smart work that has begun to ensure the state's roads are safe for all users.

**Local Aid** funding must be maintained at a level of at least \$200 million, to help municipalities maintain their roads. Local Aid projects will help the state meet its goal of building 1,000 new miles of bike lanes, and allow municipalities to develop safer walking routes along Main Streets.

The "**Safe Streets to Transit**" program, which was slashed to \$500,000 in 2012, was returned to \$1 million last year which was consistent prior year funding levels. This program helps make streets safer for pedestrians and bicyclists headed to transit hubs. Demand is strong for this program. In 2011, the state received over 75 applications, but was only

able to provide funding for 6; a mere 8% of applications. Funding for the program is woefully inadequate and Tri-State urges an increase in funding to \$2 million in this fiscal year.

**(5) Support Smart Growth** Tri-State urges the NJDOT to increase funding for the nationally recognized Transit Villages program to at least \$2 million annually from its current \$1 million. The Transit Village program has helped make New Jersey a national leader and role model in promoting sustainable, transit-oriented development by helping towns develop where it makes the most sense: near rail and bus hubs. The program is an overwhelming success. There are currently 26 designated Transit Villages and 3 municipalities were designated just last year. Funding must be increased to keep up with the demands of the program.

On behalf of Tri-State Transportation Campaign, I appreciate the opportunity to testify before this esteemed committee today.