

by Bruce Schaller

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Governor George Pataki and the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) made separate announcements in the last several weeks about the future of Lower Manhattan and increases in subway and bus fares and bridge and tunnel tolls. These announcements begin, but only begin, to show what New Yorkers can expect in these critical areas.

## SUBWAY AND BUS FARES

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority released seven options for higher [subway and bus fares](#) and is now conducting ten public hearings in New York City and the suburbs. It calls these options "several examples indicating the range of possibilities" for fare pricing structures. The "possibilities" include raising the average fare paid by riders by 10 percent, 20 percent and 33 percent. The Metropolitan Transportation Authority projects that a 33 percent fare hike would produce \$574 million more in revenue annually while reducing ridership by 110 million. On the other side of the spectrum, the 10 percent fare hikes would raise about \$190 million in revenue while reducing ridership by 25 million.

The MTA presents variations for the first two options, most of which would encourage use of unlimited ride passes, because pass prices would increase less than the base fare. Under several options, it would make sense for workers who know they will commute to work every day to buy an unlimited ride pass -- not currently the case except for riders who make several other trips a week.

By asking the public to comment on seven different options the agency has given the public much to chew on. But it also leaves open a number of questions. It is not clear whether the authority is considering adopting any specific option, much less which one that might be. It is not even clear how much revenue the authority aims to raise through this fare increase. Finally, officials have not said whether they will give the public time to comment on a final proposed fare. It is possible that the Metropolitan Transportation Authority will both announce and approve a fare increase at the same meeting, most likely in March.

The agency's presentation also mentions several other fare innovations such as insurance against losing the 30-day card, a new bi-weekly pass (they call it a "fortnightly") and a new five-day pass that could be used on nonconsecutive days. These are proposals advocated by

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the [NYPIRG Straphangers Campaign](#) and other pro-transit groups. These proposals hold the potential to continue MetroCard fare innovations and attract more riders, thus offsetting some of the ridership loss that inevitably occurs after a fare increase. (See my [report](#) on this topic.) It is not clear whether the MTA is seriously considering these ideas, however.

### BRIDGE AND TUNNEL TOLLS

While much of the focus has been on the subway and bus fare, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority also proposed higher commuter rail fares and bridge and tunnel tolls. Under the authority's [proposals](#), tolls for the major bridges and tunnels connecting the five boroughs would rise from \$3.50 to either \$3.75 or \$4.00. Tolls on the smaller crossings, such as the Henry Hudson Bridge, would increase from \$1.75 to \$1.90 or \$2.00. In both cases, the 50 cent discount for EZ-Pass users would continue.

The Tri-State Transportation Campaign countered with a [report](#) (available as a pdf file) advocating a peak-period pricing scheme in which rush hour tolls would rise to \$5.00 and non-rush tolls would stay at \$3.50. The peak-period tolls would follow the example of the Port Authority, which charges more during rush periods on its Hudson River crossings. The idea is that drivers should pay more when demand for crossing the bridge is highest, hopefully causing some drivers to switch to off-peak periods and relieve peak hour congestion. Tri-State's report concluded that peak-period pricing would slightly increase traffic speeds during the rush hour.

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority is unlikely to adopt peak-period tolls, however, fearing that if it did so many rush hour drivers would divert to the free city-owned bridges instead of pay the toll. This idea may have to await tolling of the free bridges, which Mayor Bloomberg has proposed to help plug the city's budget gap.

Finally, the MTA proposed to close 128 part-time and 49 full-time token booths. The [token booth closings](#), originally floated just before the Sept. 11 attacks put this and numerous other transportation issues on hold, have received particularly sharp resistance from subway riders who fear greater crime without the watchful eyes of token clerks, and who need the clerk's assistance to buy fare media and enter or exit through the turnstiles.

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### LOWER MANHATTAN PLANS

Meanwhile, on February 7 Governor Pataki released his long-awaited priorities for spending \$4.55 billion in federal aid to rebuild Lower Manhattan transportation facilities. (See [New York Times article](#)

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The governor's plan will also rebuild the subway terminal at South Ferry and connect the station with the Whitehall Street subway station and a new Staten Island Ferry Terminal. In the South Ferry station, the obsolete single-track 5-car station would be replaced with a 10-car, three-track, two-platform terminal. These improvements would cut down on delays on the 1/9 line and thus speed commuter access between Lower Manhattan and Penn Station, a key goal for Lower Manhattan.

These three proposals would be completed later in this decade at a cost close to \$3 billion.

Several other high profile projects were mentioned on the governor's list. Some appear likely to move forward, such as work on West Street and World Trade Center site infrastructure work that is necessary to support surface transportation. On the other hand, prospects are murkier for new rail links to the region's airports and new ferry terminals around Lower Manhattan. The total cost of these projects far exceeds the funding that is currently available. A rail link to Kennedy Airport, which is strongly desired by Lower Manhattan property owners and Mayor Bloomberg, would cost \$3.7 billion by itself, [according to the mayor](#), an uphill climb in the current fiscal climate.



Bruce Schaller is Principal of Schaller Consulting, which provides research and analysis to government, business and non-profit groups seeking to identify and meet customer needs in the transportation sector. He is also a Visiting Scholar at the Center for Transportation Policy and Management at New York University.