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# The Meadowlands in Motion

Infrastructure improvements help visitors and residents get in and around the area



Photo by Andy Kazan

Relieving congestion on jam-packed roadways does not always involve adding asphalt. That's good news for densely populated northern New Jersey, where funds and space for widening roads are increasingly hard to find.

Instead, regional initiatives are targeting the causes of traffic headaches by taking steps to improve flow within existing infrastructure. Faster buses, easier rail travel and smarter traffic signals are expected to help the region move more efficiently, both during and after big upcoming events, all without breaking the public bank.

"We're really trying to focus on improvements that are less structure-heavy, more flexible and more easily implementable" than large infrastructure projects, said Diana Fainberg, a planning consultant to developers and co-author of a regional transportation white paper in 2012. "We're trying to focus on items that can be put into action on a less expensive basis."

## Improving the traffic flow

The challenge is evident. Anyone who has driven Route 3 or Route 46 at rush hour knows to be ready for delays. At least 700,000 vehicles travel daily on corridors inside a 40-square-mile area of northern New Jersey, according to David Leibgold, transportation chief for the New Jersey Meadowlands Commission. That puts the region's major thoroughfares among the most heavily traveled in the country.

Events on the horizon are helping light a fire to get a number of transportation projects completed in the months ahead. Topping the list of catalysts: the Super Bowl at MetLife Stadium next February and the opening of American Dream Meadowlands.

Some fast-tracked projects involve heavy-duty construction. Widening of Route 3 over the Passaic River, for instance, and re-grading nearby to allow for steadier speeds are expected to be finished before the world arrives for football's biggest game.

## Smart signaling

But other projects that might have bigger long-term impacts on traffic flow take a different approach. They are moving travelers with fewer stops down major corridors, and in some cases, moving them off the roads altogether.

Secaucus is reaping early benefits of one initiative that is soon to cover the whole Meadowlands region: adaptive control traffic signals. Traffic signals in the town were upgraded in early 2013 to provide maximum adjustments to traffic conditions. By com-

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municating their adjustments to one another, they ensure all signals work in concert while preventing long lines at traffic lights.

The result has commuters pleasantly surprised.

Sabita, who requested her last name not be published, has long needed 20 minutes or more for her commute from Jersey City to North Bergen’s Miric Industries. But she’s noticed that in the past few weeks, it takes only 15 minutes as she now cruises through intersections that used to be notorious for backups.

“Traffic used to be so backed on Union Turnpike to 32nd Street, and now there’s a constant flow,” Sabita said. “There’s a light here on Paterson Plank Road that used to take forever to change. But it changes much faster now.”

That’s how the Meadowlands Adaptive Signal System for Traffic Reduction (MASSTR) is supposed to work, Leibgold says. Signals detect whether one or more lanes are getting full. As signals adjust, vehicles waiting at a light can expect to sail through green the next time the light turns. If a driver is contending with rush hour, he or she will likely catch green lights at subsequent major intersections too. That’s because the lights know to prioritize traffic flow in whichever direction most drivers are traveling.

“The sensation of driving our corridor will feel like a good or a lucky day,” Leibgold said. “It’s like a holiday or a day when school is out. You get to work quicker and feel like you hit the traffic lights just right.”

The \$12.5 million project, funded primarily by grants from the U.S. Department of Transportation, involves minimal work at intersections because workers merely install hardware such as cameras and wireless signal technology.

Adaptive traffic control is being rolled out in stages in a 40-square-mile area, until all upgrades are completed early in 2014. Most intersections will experience the intended benefits in terms of clearing out lines of traffic when lights change, Leibgold said. If any

remain congested, they will be identified as requiring more capital-intensive solutions.

#### **New developments on the horizon**

Other relatively low-cost projects in the works involve making buses faster and easier to use. Such steps mark a sensible evolution for Bergen County, according to Daniel Baer, a senior vice president for national planning at Parsons Brinckerhoff. The area developed as bedroom communities for New

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York City, he notes, but now the majority of residents work in Bergen County and need new types of public transportation.

Bergen County is on track to implement a bus rapid transit (BRT) program after an ongoing study is completed next year. Hudson County, which has more bus riders than Bergen, is also studying prospects for a BRT system.

Various factors, if deployed, could make riding the bus in a BRT scenario faster than driving. Possibilities include creating bus lanes, streamlining routes with fewer stops, and/or programming traffic signals to recognize buses and keep lights green for them.

The thinking goes like this: if it's easy to buy tickets electronically, use laptops onboard, and shave 20 minutes or more off a day's commute, then people just might leave their cars at home

"We're talking about providing a higher-level, premium kind of bus service," said Baer, who is overseeing Bergen's BRT proj-



Photo by Andy Kozie

ect. BRT in Bergen County could potentially get riders quickly not only to Manhattan, he said, but also to Bergen's malls, college facilities, and hospitals.

BRT isn't the only initiative afoot to make busing more accessible and appealing. NJ Transit is adding 10 new curbside berths for buses at the Frank R. Lautenberg Transportation Center (Secaucus Junction), thus bringing the total to 14.

This \$7.7 million project is part of Secaucus Junction's evolution from a train hub to an intermodal facility akin to Hoboken Station, Newark Penn Station, and Trenton Station. Buses have been a growing presence at Secaucus Junction as Megabus, EZ Ride Shuttles, and others have established there. Capacity is expected to grow after the new berths are finished in December 2013.

Rail travel is getting easier as well. Since a pilot program began in August, fans en route from New York's Penn Station to Meadowlands Sports Complex have been buying rail tickets online, which means bypassing ticket windows and expediting trips.

What's more, rail capacity to Meadowlands Sports Complex will soon increase by 25 percent. By extending boarding platforms at Lautenberg Station, NJ Transit is making it possible to run 10-car trains to big events. Currently Meadowlands station can accommodate 10-car trains, but it receives eight-car trains because trains are loaded at Lautenberg, which presently has an eight-car maximum. Project cost to expand Lautenberg's platforms: \$2.5 million.



All Photographs courtesy of the New Jersey Meadowlands Commission

To be sure, some congestion-relief projects in years ahead will cost far more than improving traffic signals or adding public transit capacity. Planned improvements to the Route 7 corridor won't be cheap, for example. But they could be essential, Fainberg observed, for transporting freight from giant container ships that are expected to call on Port Newark and Port Elizabeth if the Bayonne Bridge is raised as proposed to accommodate larger ships. Projected cost to raise Bayonne Bridge: \$1 billion.

In the near term, the region is looking forward to harvesting results from today's targeted, budget-conscious projects. For commuters and shippers alike, the rewards could be smooth riding. **M**

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